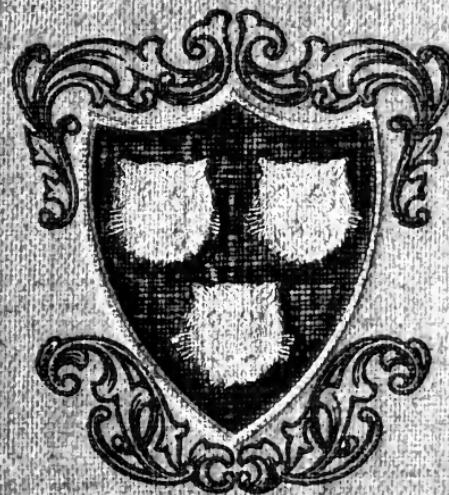


OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE



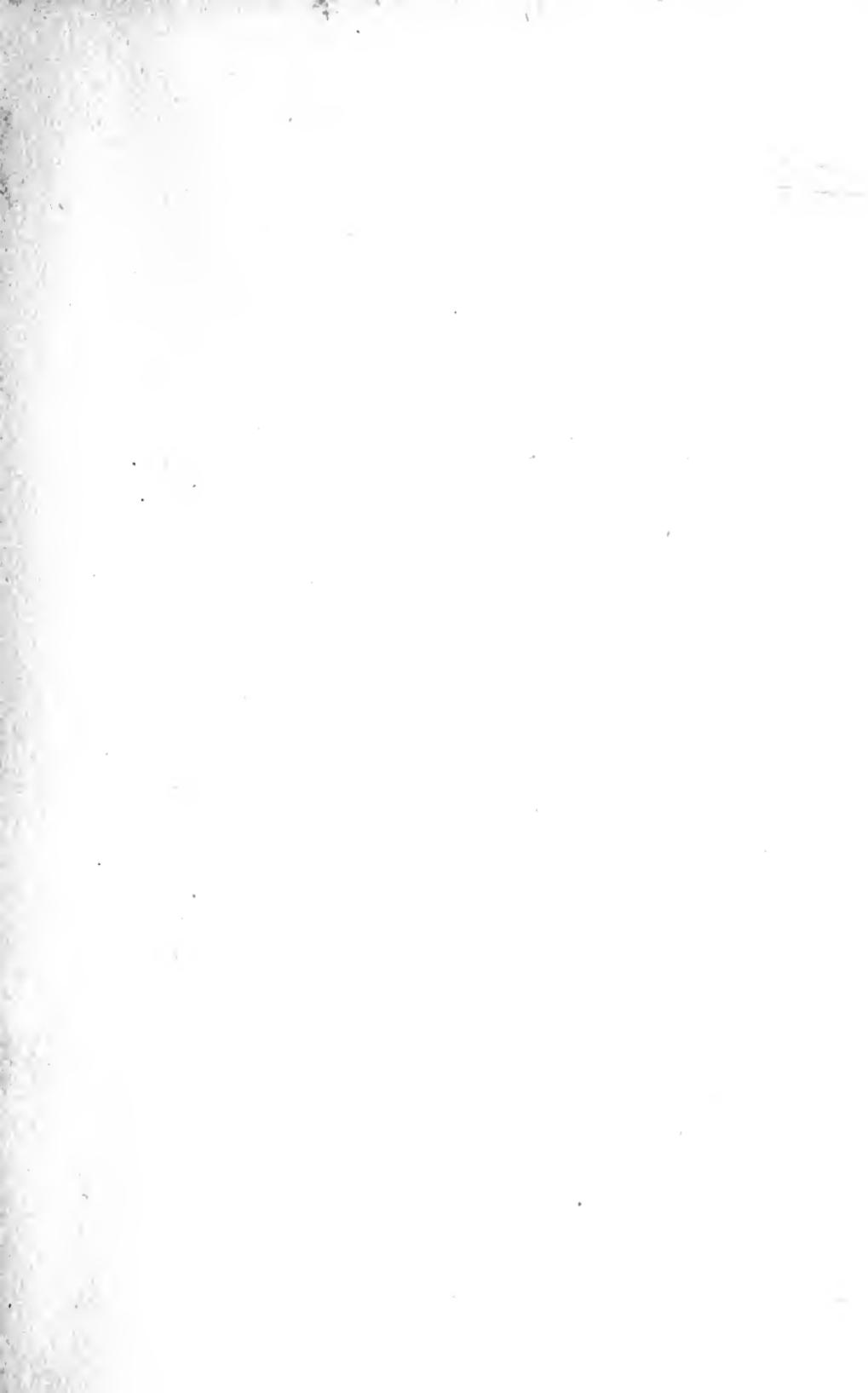
YB 32716

ADY CATHERINE MILNES
GASKELL



8/59





Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

<http://www.archive.org/details/oldshropshirelif00gaskrich>

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE





LUTWYCHE HALL.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

BY

Hennett's Walks

LADY CATHERINE MILNES GASKELL

ff



JOHN LANE : THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON & NEW YORK MDCCCCIV

961
G 948
d

THE MILITARY AERONAUTICS

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
London & Edinburgh

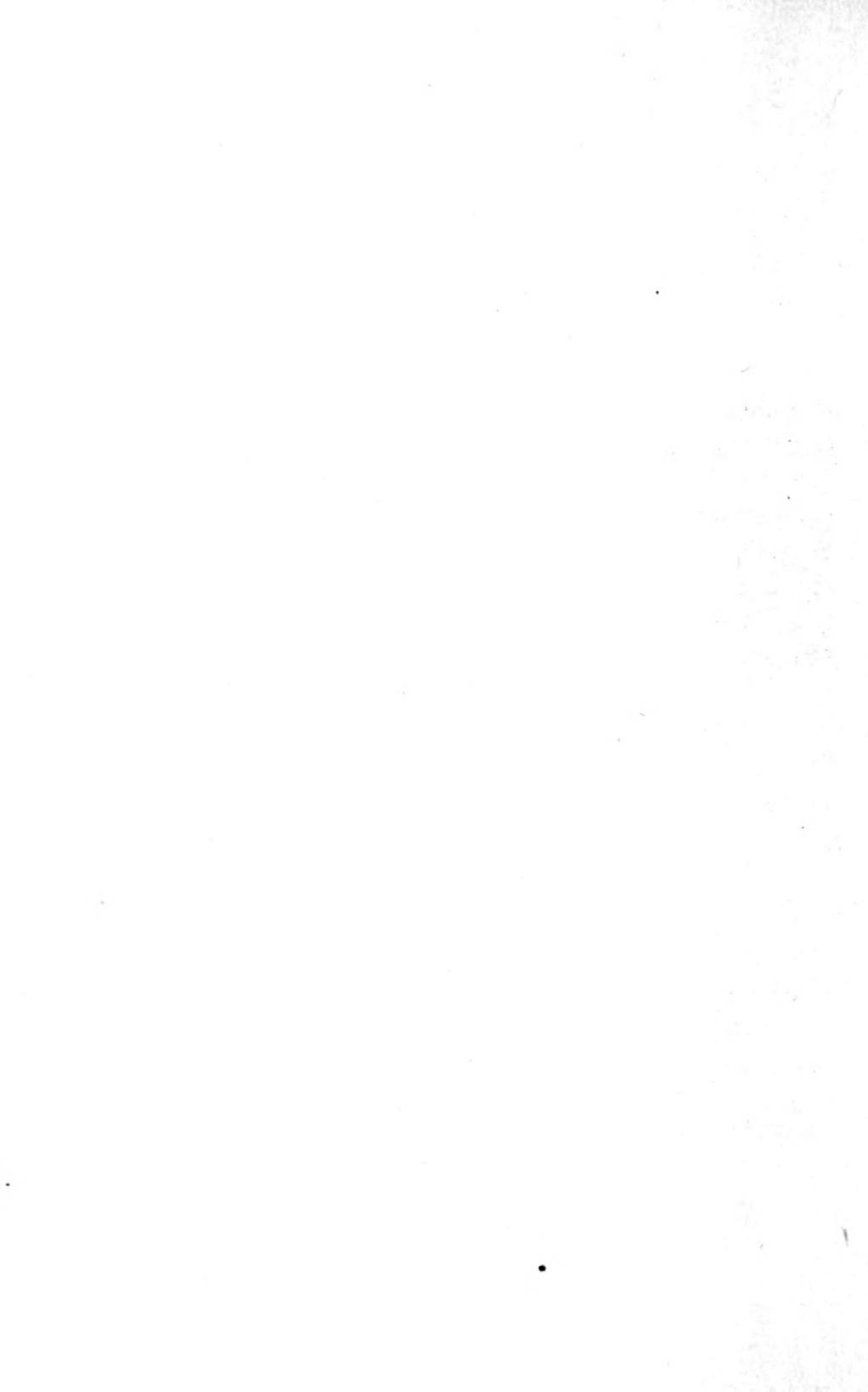
CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE MAJOR'S LEAP	II
CHRIST'S TREE	80
THE WHITE PURIFICATION	105
'THE WITCH'S COCK"	129
THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM	149
THE HOLY WELL	170
A WREATH OF ROSES	203
THE RETURN OF JOY	216
THE WITCH'S UNGUENT	241
THE STRANGE KNIFE	265
LIST OF OLD SHROPSHIRE WORDS	302

M173592

ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Lutwyche Hall</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	<i>Frontispiece</i>
<i>Ashfield Hall, Much Wenlock</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	<i>To face page</i> 28
<i>(From a photograph by Messrs. F. Frith & Co. Ltd.)</i>												
<i>Wenlock Edge</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	62
<i>The Elder Tree in Blossom</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	82
<i>Wenlock Church</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	96
<i>(From a photograph by Messrs. F. Frith & Co. Ltd.)</i>												
<i>Wenlock Guildhall</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	108
<i>(From a photograph by Messrs. Valentine & Sons, Ltd.)</i>												
<i>Old Willey Hall</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	118
<i>The Ash Tree</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	144
<i>The Abbey Farmery</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	150
<i>Speinton Street, Much Wenlock</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	196
<i>(From a photograph by Messrs. Valentine & Sons, Ltd.)</i>												
<i>The Holy Well</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	200
<i>Tong Church</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	214
<i>Shipton Hall</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	226
<i>Benthall Hall</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	244
<i>Ruins of the Abbey Church, Much Wenlock</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	278
<i>(From a photograph by Messrs. F. Frith & Co. Ltd.)</i>												
<i>Sherlot Forest</i>	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	294



THE MAJOR'S LEAP

ON the road from Much Wenlock to Lutwyche, facing Mog Forest, there stands a farmhouse, on the site of which there stood once an old manor-house which went by the name of The Leas. It was, I have been told, an old dower-house of the Lutwyches, and formerly, before a fire in the middle of the eighteenth century, was a well-known landmark in that thinly populated district. The Leas was a black-and-white timber house of Elizabethan date with a stone-tile roof, a red brick tower, and little terrace gardens running down to the high-road.

In the first years of the eighteenth century the house was inhabited by Madam Woolridge, a cousin of the squire then reigning at Lutwyche Hall. Madam Woolridge was a dainty little lady with soft grey eyes, small hands and feet, of slender build and diminutive stature. She was the widow of an unfortunate gentleman, it was said, who had taken part in Monmouth's rebellion, and who had fought at Sedgemoor. "Madam," as she was called, lived very quietly at the Leas, saw

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

but little company, visiting only the parson's wife of the neighbourhood, her cousin at the Hall, and his lady, Phœbe.

Lawrence Woolridge had managed to escape after Sedgemoor, and to evade the pursuit of James' agents, but some years elapsed before the captain, as he was called, ventured to quit the safety of a Dutch lodging and to return to his wife in Shropshire. After William and Mary's accession, however, he had returned and settled again at The Leas. From this union one child was born, a boy, who was christened Gilbert, after a remote ancestor. Lawrence did not survive long after his son's birth, as he died from a fall in the hunting-field, and the care and education, therefore, of the boy devolved entirely upon his mother.

As a child Gilbert was the prettiest little lad imaginable. He had clear blue eyes, dark eyebrows, and a skin like a rose-leaf, delicate small hands, and a head of hair that curled in rain and sunshine alike. Gilbert was his mother's darling and idol. She dreamt for him fair dreams. Nothing was too good for him, and she, poor soul, was sure, like many a good and devoted mother, that there lay before her son a great and honourable future. Madam Woolridge's income was scanty, but nothing was too good for her boy. He was born, she thought, to have the best of everything, and Heaven only

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

knows how she pinched and economised that he might have a suit of blue velvet to go to church in on Sundays at Easthope, or to visit his cousins at the Hall, when Madam Lutwyche invited him to partake of a dish of Bohea.

One day, when Gilbert was about seven years old, Madam Woolridge said she would take him for a walk on the Wenlock Road. "We will take a basket, Bertie," she said, "and I will pull some bunches of primroses, whilst you shall ride Gunpowder, and John Sedgrow shall lead him."

"I will ride Gunpowder, but John shall not lead him," was her son's reply. "I will guide him myself. A man and a gentleman should know how to ride." Then his mother kissed him, and vowed he had a proper pride.

A few minutes later Priscilla Woolridge and her son started on their expedition. Old John Sedgrow walked beside Gunpowder, but was not allowed to touch the bridle.

"I'll ride like father some day," cried Gilbert exultantly, "and wear a sword. A gentleman should know both how to ride and how to fight."

"Nay, love," said his mother, recalling, with a little shudder, the long, weary, anxious years she had spent alone at The Leas whilst her husband was in the Low Countries, "you must stay with me and have a horse, and chase the fox as the

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

gentry do, and marry pretty cousin Beatrice at the Hall later."

"After a bit, madam," answered the little lad in the language of the time, "but first I would like to have a regiment of soldiers such as Jabez Badnedge talks about when he brings in the wood from the Edge."

At this remark the widow laughed and sighed, and old John declared "that the young master's spirit was of the same mettle as Parson Jones' best fighting-cock. Every inch a gentleman, and a bit of a dare-devil to boot."

They went chattering and laughing along the high-road, but found no flowers.

"Us had best turn down the fields and get into the Edge Wood, madam," remarked the old man. "The blows here be scarce as the grain after the gleaners have a-gone round. Us be more likely to find posies in the wood."

A minute later they passed through a gate, and skirting two clover-fields they entered the wood. The woodcutters had been busy during the winter felling trees, and the flowers in the open space had come up, in great profusion, as is their way after the cutting of the undergrowth.

There were groups of pale yellow primroses, tufts of the amethyst-tinted dog-violets, and sheets of tremulous waving wind-flowers. Old John stopped and lifted the little boy off the old white

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

horse. "There," he said, "young gemman, thee can pull what thee wants for madam's boudoir, and deck her chamber gay as a Maypole on May morning."

Gilbert sprang about the copse like a young fawn, shouting with glee, and in his excitement dropping almost more flowers than he held.

"I see more, more," he cried, and so saying mounted the hill.

"He may hurt himself," suddenly exclaimed his mother, for the direction in which Gilbert was going was precipitous, and the ground rocky and dangerous just below Smallman's Leap.

"Never thee fear, my lady," said old John, "the little gemman will come to no harm; he's as brave as a lion and handy as a kitten, and harm don't come to such as he as be country bred."

"Still, I am afraid," said his mother, turning pale. "A child does not consider where he goes," and she called to her son to come back. But Gilbert paid no heed. Then Priscilla turned to John. "Quick," she said, "I will hold the beast, and thou shalt mount the hill and bring him back." To this John assented, but not too readily, for the old man suffered from rheumatism, and the ascent was both steep and slippery in places.

He vanished from sight, but a few minutes later reappeared through the brushwood, leading by

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

the hand the little boy. Both were laden with flowers. "Here he be," cried John, "but the young master were dreadful artful to catch ; same as Billy Bebbs' donkey and a dog-fox all in one The more I called, the less he heard. But I catched 'un afore he got to the rocks."

"Dost know, child," said Madam Woolridge gravely, with a white face, "that the rocks are dangerous, and that it was there that the brave major's horse was killed when the major leapt down to escape from Cromwell's troopers."

Hearing his mother recount the famous Shropshire tale, Gilbert's eyes dilated, and he stood forth flushed with interest by her side.

"It was a bold thing to do, mother, and I love the major for it. Some day I will jump down as great a place if the Queen's soldiers chase me," he said. "I would never give myself up whatever happened, for that is what only cowards do."

"Nay, nay ! boy," said his mother reprovingly, "there is no fear of such things happening now, for, thank God, we have a good and virtuous Queen on the throne—a true protestant, and if, lad, thou must needs become a soldier, which God forbid, then, Bertie, thou must learn and serve her as one of her generals."

"That I will," quoth Gilbert eagerly. "I'll wear a cocked hat, and a wig, and don a sword with a golden handle."

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

"So thou mayst, young maister," interrupted old John rather crossly; "so long as I haven't to mind thee, thou mayst go thy own gait, but mindin' he be like catchin' thistle-down cased in prickles," and the old man stopped, for the hill was steep and the day was warm—and John, as he spoke, took off his hat and mopped his forehead freely.

"Thou shalt have, friend," said Madam Woolridge, "no cause of complaint. When we return, Nancy shall reward thee with a draught of strong ale for thy pains."

"I thank thee, my lady," said the old retainer, "for minding childer do call for a lot of sust'nance and good nourishment. Nor harvesting norditching be in it."

To this remark Madam Woolridge made no answer, but bade John, a few minutes later, lift her son on to the horse, and declared that it was time for them to return to the Leas. The party accordingly walked on along the deeply rutted path. As they advanced, they could discern in the distance the smoke rising from the far town of Shrewsbury in the plain below, whilst just beneath them they could see the farmhouses and hamlets shining in the clear April sunshine, and the red cattle grazing in the green meadows.

A sweet and silent place the great wood seemed to Priscilla, as she walked along. It was full of budding leaves, and the sweet sense of awakening

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

life pervaded all. Suddenly, as they mounted the hill, old Gunpowder snorted and gave a jump. "What be up to, horse?" cried old John, jerking angrily at the rein. Then they saw lying beneath a tree what seemed at first a heap of rags. "'Tis a sack of rubbish," exclaimed the old man—"but who put it there I'd like to know." At this point the sack in question rose, and turned out to be no sack after all, but a gaunt large-boned woman of great height, clad in a tattered military cloak, broad chested, rough, and unkempt, with large brown hands. She stood looking at Madam Woolridge, and by her stood, half hidden among her skirts, a little lad of some seven years. The woman had hard ill-favoured features, a walnut-coloured face and wild haggard eyes.

"How darest thou to get in madam's way?" cried out old John, with the extreme severity so often shown by the poor to one of their own order. "How darest thou to lie there like a hare in the Quality's wood? Sure the constables will be after thee. A wench in rags be like a hunted fox; all honest folk's hands be against her. Thou hast been thieving like enough, thou and thy whelp. But thou wilt soon find rest in Shrewsbury jail, and change in the plantations I be thinking."

At this rebuke the woman only moaned, and advancing a step, implored with tears Madam Woolridge's pity.

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

"We be starving folks," she said. "I and my boy we haven't a-eaten nought for many hours."

Priscilla was much moved. "I have no food here, my good woman," she said, "but return with me, and I will see that thy needs are attended to—thou and thy boy shall both be fed, and if thou art of decent habits, I, or the squire, will find thee employment."

At this old John begun to grumble aloud. "They didn't want no beggars, or beggar's brats at the Leas," he swore. "There was plenty in the parish as wanted help, and as to outcasts and foreigners, if the Quality meant to harbour such wild birds they'd find their silver spoons and forks missing some day, not to speak of their throats cut, as sure as his name was John Sedgrow."

At this outburst, madam commanded her servant to be silent, and to bear in mind that she was mistress in her own house, and needed no advice from a serving-man. So together the strange party walked home—Gilbert leading Gunpowder, and the woman and child following close to Priscilla, whilst John lagged sulkily behind.

When they got back they found that old Dolly Speke, madam's waiting-woman, had prepared a meal in the oak parlour.

"I am not hungry," said Gilbert, "but that boy is," and seizing hold of a dish of cakes he ran out impulsively and took it to the woman and child,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

who had remained in the garden, and gave it to them.

"I like to see folks eat when they are hungry," he cried in a lordly way, "and I can vouch for the cakes being good. You shall drink to my health in a mug of beer," he added, "or in a cup of cowslip wine."

Ample refreshments were then given to the woman and her son, in spite of Dolly Speke's sour face and John's open dislike to them, and the new-comers sat down on the steps of the mounting-block and ate voraciously. After they had had their fill the mistress of the house came out, and the strange woman found courage to talk to her.

"God bless you, madam," she said fervently, her voice trembling with gratitude. "God bless you and the dear young maister." And a radiant smile lit up her hard ill-favoured features like a sunbeam between thunderclouds. Then madam asked her name and that of her son.

"Nan," was her answer; "I know no other, and as to the boy, I called him Max. We have come all the way from London," and Nan told her story. It appears she was of Welsh origin, but had lived since she was ten years old with her grandmother in London. "My grandam," she said, "was the wife of a seafaring man, and although agone eighty she was as hard as nails,

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

stout and hearty. Grandam, she keeps a public called the Admiral Benbow, and I waited on her and on the soldiers, and sailors, that came to our inn. I was a great strapping lass—hulking, grandam called me when she was out of temper—and not a beauty, as you can see, madam. Well, when I was about twenty there came one evening to our place an old mariner called Jyke Ditch, and he brought with him the prettiest soldier lad that ever you saw. A delicate piece with straight features like a doll, and looked as if he had been made out of porcelain, blue-eyed, neat, and trim as a silver pin. Well, the long and short of it was I fell in love with him, just as if I had been a pretty lass—the more fool I—and believed what he told me, though I ought to have known better than to have thought he ever could have cared for a mahogany-faced giantess like myself, for when he stood on tiptoe he could barely reach my shoulder. However, to make a long story short, we was married in spite of all grandam could do to prevent us, and she would stamp about in an awful rage on her sanded floor when she heard us what she called billing and cooing. Well, when we was married, grandam she cut up regular rough, and she wouldn't have me livin' with her at any price, and got a new girl, so I had to lodge with a woman I knew, and went out washin' for the regiment my husband was in. I regular slaved from morn-

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

ing till night, and doted on my man as only an ugly woman can. I starved, and pinched, and picked up pence where I could, carried coal for neighbours, chopped up wood, and carried goods far trifling payments, and whatever I made, he took and spent like a gentleman, as to the manner born.

“One day I was in luck. Peg O’Flarty was taken ill, and I got the colonel’s washing, and his lady being extra kind, she gave me an old cloak of the colonel’s, and a coat of his honour’s. I put ‘em on, being winter-time, and the weather bitter. The men they laughed a bit and chaffed, and I got known as Corporal Dick, but the coat and cloak they kept me warm, and so I didn’t mind. Then suddenly I knew I should be a mother, and when I told him he grew cold, only took my money and never fondled me.” Here she looked up and a fierce gleam lit up her eyes. “Later, when the child came,” she continued, “he vanished, said that he had got his discharge, and would come back, and make a home for me and baby ; but he never did, and I was left to provide for the babe and myself as best I could. When I was about again I went off to the Benbow, but grandam shut the door in my face and declared hers was a Public and no home for orphans, and I heard her rage up and down her house like a lioness on the warpath. I cried and begged all

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

I knew for a roof to sleep under—I wouldn't have done it for myself, but I feared as the child would die, for the weather was bitter, and go where I would none would give me food or work. Some said I was strange-looking, some as they wouldn't have a man in woman's clothing, and one and all made it clear as they couldn't abear the sight of me and my ugly face. So then I thought, and remembered my first old home in Wales, and wondered if I couldn't struggle back there somehow, and get work to keep myself and my boy."

"We will find thee work," said Madam Woolridge, her eyes glistening with sympathy. "Thine has been a hard life, poor soul—little coin and many kicks."

At this point Gilbert burst in upon them. "Mamma, I have settled it all," he cried with the impulsive generosity of a spoilt child. "The strange woman must not go; she and her son can live in the house in the garden; she can work for you, weed, carry up the wood, and the boy can be my soldier man. We can fight battles, storm castles, and play at attacks. I must have some one to play with," he added authoritatively. "It's too dull for a man to live alone. Even Tom puss plays with pussie in the field."

So the matter was settled off-hand, in spite of

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

old John's frowns and Mistress Speke's dislike, and a bed was carried out and placed in the gazebo, as it was called, at the end of the flower garden. Some sticks of furniture were also placed there, and so the solitary chamber of the summer-house was fitted up as a living-room. Old John soon grew reconciled to the strangers, for Nan did most of the work of the garden. She would rise at five, summer and winter alike, milk the cows, weed or dig, carry wood into the house, and scour down the kitchen and scullery before breakfast. Owing to her industry, John was enabled to spend many happy hours reclining in a wheelbarrow and smoking his pipe of peace. So, as the old man said, "It was a deal less bad than it looked at first. Charity sometimes pays, at least when the gentry minds the cost."

Nan worked unceasingly and never spared herself, and though Mistress Speke kept a sour face, as is the way of most waiting-women about a fellow servant whom they have not engaged, still she could not but acknowledge that Nan did the work of four, and was never sick, or sorry. Nan, or the long woman as she was called, was indefatigable at the wash-tub, in stirring preserves, or in the distilling of perfumes or drinks, and for all her hands were so large and powerful she never broke pot, or dish.

As to her boy, he ran about all the day with

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

"the little gentleman" as Gilbert was called, was "a regular sharpshins" in snaring rabbits, and could climb any tree bird-nesting, besides which he was indefatigable in doing soldier man when the fancy seized the young gentleman for playing the part of colonel. Much of the boys' playtime was spent in storming imaginary castles, in lying in ambush, and in pretending to fire on old John when the latter was working in the garden or cutting up sticks. Nan would often join in these games, and with a staff in place of a musket she would pretend to fire at the word of command, lie down behind the beech hedge as a spy, and play the part, as it was called, of Corporal Dick. Two years passed happily enough, and Madam Woolridge felt herself rewarded for her kindness in the increased health and happiness of her son, and as Nan received no wages, and was only given from time to time an old woollen dress, out of which she would make herself a skirt or a cloak, small expense was incurred. As to Max, he wore Gilbert's suits when too shabby for that young gentleman's wear, and Nan would add a patch of any woollen stuff, whatever the colour, to lengthen his breeks or to enlarge his jacket. Max had inherited his mother's colossal stature, and was taller than madam's son by several inches, although they were of the same age.

When Gilbert touched his ninth birthday, it

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

was decided by his mother, owing to the squire's advice, that he should receive further tuition, than such teaching as she had been able to give him, from a master at Wenlock. It was arranged every morning, therefore, but Sunday, that Gilbert should ride into the old borough and receive lessons in Latin and Greek, and acquire such erudition as was then considered necessary for a gentleman. Master Jabez Trantor was to become his master. He was a sickly, pallid, shabby-looking man of about fifty, with shifty grey eyes that continually overflowed, and a settled stoop, but was accounted a good scholar in the dead languages, and was said to be able to speak fluently French and Dutch.

Nobody knew much of Master Trantor's history or antecedents ; little, in fact, save that he lodged over Master Cowdel, the tallow-chandler's shop, in a black and white timber house at Much Wenlock, and gave lessons to students on week days.

"He'll birch thee, sir," said Max, on hearing of this arrangement.

"He will not do it twice," replied Gilbert grimly.

There must have been something in Gilbert's eye which caused Master Jabez's hand to respect his pupil, for though Gilbert was often lazy he always found his teacher indulgent. Every morning save Sunday, directly after his breakfast,

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

Gilbert would mount old Gunpowder and would trot briskly away down the Wenlock road whilst Max ran holding on to a stirrup-leather.

The two mothers would watch their departure from the hall latticed window, and Nan would say, with tears rising in her rough-hewn face, "There's nothing my son wouldn't do for yourn."

One day in fine spring weather the two boys returned much later than usual.

"Where have you been?" inquired Madam Woolridge anxiously. "Thoughtless lad, you have upset me terribly. I was nearly sending out John and Nan to find you, for I feared some evil must have befallen you."

"Mamma," replied Gilbert with a pink flush, "we did but stop to see the fair. 'Tis a poor life living here always alone, and you should know that I must see a great deal before I am a general."

"Say, love, what did you see?" inquired his mother softening.

"Plenty of fine sights," answered Gilbert loftily. "There was the pig-faced lady, the true giantess, and a bigger crowd of folks than I should have thought could have met together at once."

"Well, well, my lad," said his mother tenderly, "you can only be young once, and it is doubtless dull for young blood living alone in this quiet and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

lonely house," and thereupon she fell a thinking of how best she could brighten his life, and give him more pleasures.

Nothing more was said about the fair that day, and Gilbert ate his supper as usual, but some days later news came that small-pox—that most terrible scourge of the eighteenth century—had broken out at Much Wenlock, and that Dr. Blashfield had more patients down with it than he could see in the day, even with the aid of his assistant.

"You must not go again to Much Wenlock, Gilbert," his mother said. "I will acquaint Master Trantor with this fact, and Max shall take him a letter. You shall study here alone, for it is no longer safe to visit the town."

Max accordingly ran off with a note to Master Jabez, who, when he received it, shook his head, and declared that he would answer it shortly in person.

A few hours later and Master Trantor arrived and had a long interview with Madam Woolridge. Nan admitted him. Directly she saw him she took an instinctive dislike to the little man's shifty look, pallid face, and downcast eyes.

"I like a man what looks straight," she said, when questioned later on about her young master's teacher.



Photo by Frith.

ASHFIELD HALL, MUCH WENLOCK.

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

"He's just a learned prig," was Gilbert's verdict, "and you mustn't expect too much from that sort."

After the interview with her mistress, Nan saw him ride off on his lame pony, and as he rode up the road she fancied he had a look of triumph on his face. When she entered the parlour before supper she thought her mistress's eyes looked red. Mistress Speke was, however, not forthcoming in giving her any information when questioned as to the cause of madam's looks. In fact, that dame only pursed up her lips and said snappishly, "Stray crows should not be curious; and that it was a good thing for every one to mind their own business."

The next day at breakfast-time an unusual thing happened. Gilbert, during the meal, vowed that he must have a new bridle for Gunpowder, and some fresh stirrup-leathers. Madam at this, to Nan's surprise, broke out, against her habit, in a quick flush of temper, and declared that she would be ruined if her money was to be spent in so regardless and reckless a manner, and got quite excited over the matter.

Nan, in thinking over what had happened, could not help fancying that there might be some connection between the schoolmaster's visit and madam's sudden fit of economy. However, Gilbert got his new bridle in the end, and also

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

the stirrup-leathers ; the only difference was that madam went without a new kerchief that she had proposed buying for herself from Draper James, of Shrewsbury.

About ten days after the lads had been last to Much Wenlock, Gilbert woke up one morning with a violent headache, and declared that he felt giddy when he got out of bed, and complained also of pains in the back.

Mistress Speke apprised his mother of these facts. "He looks hot and seems in a strange distemper, madam," she said, "and he has a crimson flushed face."

A minute later and Madam Woolridge was with Gilbert in his little whitewashed chamber hung with dimity.

"I am hot—hot—mother," cried the boy. "I feel on fire, and the pains in my back are almost more than I can bear."

Madam Woolridge was alarmed. "We must send for Dr. Blashfield at once," she said, feeling the boy's pulse.

After this she sat down hastily, and wrote begging the doctor to attend her son as soon as possible, as she believed him to be in a state of high fever.

"Who can take this note?" she inquired, rising from her escritoire.

It was raining gently, soft spring rain, and the

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

thrushes were singing and calling tumultuously outside.

"Why not Max?" cried old Dolly, who had entered the room. "The lad so would be of use for once in his life. He does little enough to earn his victuals."

Madam Woolridge agreed, and tapped at the window, beckoning to Nan, who was in the garden, to come to her.

The woman stalked in, grim and tall and brown, without shawl or headgear.

"Where is Max?" asked her mistress.

"I'll find him," said his mother evasively.

"Where is he?" persisted Madam Woolridge.

Then Nan told her that the lad was sitting down before the kitchen fire, "not quite hisself," to use her expression; "but a ride in this growing weather will do him no harm," and, she added, "I'll saddle Gunpowder, madam, and the lad shall carry your ladyship's letter."

Madam Woolridge would have protested had not Dolly Speke been present, and had the waiting-woman not called out loudly, "Send him at once; a ride will do him no harm." So without a word Nan went and saddled the old grey horse, and lifted her son into the saddle, but a strange giddiness overtook the lad. "Canst not sit straight, man?" she asked. For all answer the boy's head fell upon his chest, and he would have

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

fallen forward if his mother had not caught him in her arms.

"My head, mother, my head," he murmured.

Then Nan, after laying her son on her bed, put the letter into a leathern wallet that she often wore. This she swung across her shoulders, and so arrayed proceeded to trudge into Wenlock.

She left the note at Dr. Blashfield's house and walked back as rapidly as possible on hearing that the doctor was out.

His servant, by her earnest request, promised to tell his master how ill the young gentleman was, and to beg the doctor to go to the Leas as soon as possible. When Nan got back she at once sought her mistress to report what she had done, and then begged to see after her own child, who, to use her own words, "seemed but sorry" when she left.

A little later in the day Dr. Blashfield rode up on his nag and tied it to a ring by the gate, as was his habit. The doctor was at once admitted into Gilbert's chamber by Nan, who had been watching for his arrival. After examining the boy the good old man gravely shook his head. "It is what I feared," he said to Madam Woolridge, and told her in a few simple words that he had no doubt that her son was suffering from the small-pox.

Madam Woolridge received this news quite

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

quietly, for all that she was a delicate, highly-strung, nervous little woman, and only asked for directions of how best to deal with the malady.

Dr. Blashfield thereupon ordered certain things to be done, and laid down certain rules that were to be observed during the illness, and at last wound up by asking Madam Woolridge whom she had to help her to nurse her son, for, he said, "it will be an arduous task; you have no great strength, and Gilbert is in a high state of fever, and must not be left day or night."

Then madam told him reassuringly that she could count upon the fidelity of her waiting-woman, and added, reddening, "I would as soon doubt Dorothy's love of the child as my own."

To this the physician replied, "In this matter you should know best, madam, but my experience is that the country folk here have a mortal terror of the disease, and even mothers will hardly attend their own children when they know the nature of the malady."

Madam Woolridge made no answer, but pressed her son's hand tenderly in hers.

As the doctor left Gilbert's bedroom he found Nan awaiting him in the passage. She entreated him not to leave before he had visited her son. "My boy," she said, "seemed strange and hot to-day, and could not take the note for madam."

Dr. Blashfield followed the tall gaunt woman

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

into the garden after he had examined her son. "Thou art called," he said, looking at her keenly, "a brave woman, and if I mistake not hast no white feather. Thy lad is down with small-pox like the young master. I will mix a bottle of the same physic for both. Keep thy son warm, and the treatment, that I have ordered for the young gentleman, thy son must have also. Madam will instruct thee. Thou art not frightened?" he said, as he paused to mount his horse.

"Nay, sir," said Nan. "I love both lads too much, your honour, to be afraid. Besides, there is my duty to madam."

Thereupon the kindly doctor laid his hand upon her shoulder. "Madam will want all thy care and kindness, Nan," he said; "she is but a piece of fragile porcelain, and Gilbert's illness must needs be a long one. Thou hast found in her a friend. Be worthy of her goodness."

Then Nan's eyes lit up with a bright light. "I would die for her, and the young maister any day," she said.

A few hours later Nan heard Madam Woolridge calling in the garden as one in distress. In haste she ran out to learn what her mistress needed. Then madam, hurrying down the trim box-edged paths, called out, breathless and in a state of great excitement, "I have come to ask thy aid, Nan. Dolly and the other wenches have fled. I am not

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

surprised at the wenches losing their heads, but I should never have thought that Dolly would have deserted me. She has been with me since I was a child. I thought her sour, but as true as steel. I did not think it was in her to leave me or my boy, and he so ill too. Ah, who can I trust?"

For all answer Nan knelt down on the gravel path and reverently kissed the hem of madam's dress. "You were good to me when I thought God had forsaken me and my boy," she said. "I will serve you to the death if needs be. There be no disease as can damage my brown face," she added and laughed gently.

Then madam stooped down and solemnly kissed her on the forehead. "Nan," she said, "I know that God has sent me a true friend in thee."

After this the two women quickly relapsed into every-day ways, and it was decided that Nan should bring her boy across in blankets from the gazebo and lay him on a couch in Gilbert's chamber, and that the two lads should be nursed, and tended in the same room.

In the course of half an hour Max was laid on a sofa beside Gilbert's bed.

"How be you, sir?" inquired Nan's lad.

"I'm bad, bad," replied Gilbert. "It will be a long while before I can be the general again." Then the two boys laughed, but faintly, as at some far-off joke.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

On the day when the fever was at its height both lads rambled in their talk. In imagination they went through battles, frontal attacks and wild charges, but Gilbert was always the general, Max the private, and Corporal Dick, as Nan was called, was often invited to take her part.

“Advance! fire! bid the hussars hold their own—at all costs the enemy must be outflanked,” and such-like phrases would burst from Gilbert’s lips, and then Max would answer, “The men are all posted, sir—the muskets loaded, and all is ready for the coming of the enemy.” And so the two would ramble on. Every now and then Gilbert would sit up in bed and call out, “Quick march, fire!” and Max would answer, “Ready, sir, ready.” Night and day the two mothers would watch and tend their sons, and Nan would sometimes join in the talk when an answer seemed to be needed in the capacity of Corporal Dick.

Nan milked the cows, prepared the food, and brought all that was needed up from the kitchen. Gilbert would drink first from the cup some broth or milk, and Max would finish the remainder. They shared alike, according to Nan’s dictum, but the young gentleman had always first share. No one came to call or to inquire after Gilbert, only on the third day Nan found in the early morning a note attached to the scraper by a blue ribbon. Jim Crow, the keeper’s boy, she learnt

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

later, had brought it from Madam Lutwyche, expressing her sorrow at hearing the bad news of Gilbert's illness, and begging to be excused from coming in person to condole. At the end was a kindly postscript saying that gifts, such as rabbits and trout, should be laid on the doorstep every morning.

The Leas was, therefore, as unvisited as if its occupants were suffering from the plague, save for the visits of Dr. Blashfield. That kindly old man came daily, and brought one day some flour in a sack, another a basket of meat and medicines, and a third some fruit. On the day when the fever was at its height the old doctor made an early call.

"Give the old mare a mouthful of hay, Nan," he said, "for I must bide here awhile to-day." Then he looked up searchingly at Madam Woolridge's pale, delicate face and said, "Courage, madam," and added, "if an old man's prayers may avail, they are yours. I trust God will give you back your boy."

Immediately afterwards the lads began moaning and talking, defending castles in imagination, lying in ambush, or making a sortie upon the enemy. Gilbert's voice was strong and clear, and he gave continual orders, but Max, for all that he was the biggest, seemed far the weakest. "Coming, sir, coming," he would say feebly, as

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

he lay weak and white for all the rash that covered his face, but in his imagination there was always a hill that was hard to breast, or a dyke that could not be leapt. At last he whimpered in pain, "Give me a stirrup, sir; for the love of God a stirrup, so that I may get on to Gunpowder."

The doctor looked grave, and noted the fluttering changes that swept over Max's face. "He is very weak," he said, and added, turning to his mother, "I suppose the little chap had a hard time before he came here." Then, without waiting for a reply, the doctor ordered him some cognac in milk, and Nan brought some.

For a moment the draught seemed to revive the boy. Max sat up in bed and laughed.

"The little lad's coming round," said the doctor joining in the laugh. "I hope," and he beamed on Nan, "that in a day or so he will give the enemy a drubbing yet."

But almost immediately the light died out of Max's eyes, and he fell back moaning. "No good, sir, no good," he whimpered, "the enemy be on us, and they are drawing their cutlasses, and I have none. Give us a hand, give us a hand."

The kind doctor, to reassure the child, stooped down and joined together those of the lad's, saying in his benevolent husky voice, "Now thou art right, man; see, here is the general's hand."

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

But Max's eyes glazed over almost as he spoke, and his breathing grew feebler and feebler, and in a little while all was over.

"He's gone," said the doctor simply, "I could not save him," and tears rose in his kind old eyes In the meantime Gilbert had fallen asleep.

"Your son is safe, madam," said the doctor before he left the Leas. "He will live, and, please God, be a comfort to you. God has been merciful to you. Be a kind friend and mistress to the poor woman who has lost her son to-day."

For all reply the two women found themselves weeping in each other's arms, and remained there sobbing for a few moments.

After the burial of Max, which was performed with difficulty, and only by the promise of a large payment on the part of Madam Woolridge, Nan seemed to give her whole heart to her mistress and to her mistress's son. Over this last she would watch with unceasing devotion, whilst she continued to do the whole work of the house and garden. Sometimes madam would bid her rest awhile, or leave some self-imposed task undone. But when this was the case Nan would only laugh. "I'm like Davy Jones' horse," she would say, "I don't know what it is to be sick or sorry. Work's never too hard for my big hands," and she would add grimly, "neither sun nor snow can damage my beauty." Nan would therefore rise at dawn, scrub

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

and clean, and was often to be seen, when the boy grew strong again, digging in the garden arrayed in her old regimental coat and singing some mariner's chanty that she had learnt as a girl while living at the Admiral Benbow.

“ Five pots of beer and good plum duff,
And so around the world my hearties.”

This she would roar forth to a great rollicking swinging tune, and in a voice that seemed to rise from her boots, as folks say.

Later on the two under serving-maids returned to their posts, but madam would never have aught to do again with Mistress Dolly Speke, her former waiting-woman, and when she met her after morning service some months later at East-hope Church to give thanks for her son's recovery, it is said that, mild woman as madam generally was, she cut her former waiting-woman dead, with a fierce flash in her eyes and a scarlet face.

Time passed on and Nan grew more and more a servant of trust, and a personage of consideration in the widow's household. She ordered in all the food, sold at the weekly market any dairy or garden produce not needed, and so enriched her mistress by a considerable sum during the year. Nan was a thrifty and careful housewife, and madam turned to her for aid and advice in all domestic matters. Both the

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

women worshipped at Gilbert's shrine. He grew up bright, gay, and handsome, and distinguished himself at Shrewsbury School. When he completed his eighteenth year both mother and son felt that the time for parting had come. The boy was anxious to seek his fortunes in a wider field, and his mother realised she could not any longer hold him at home. Gilbert's old master, Jabez, was sent for to aid by his counsel, as he was supposed to have friends in London who might be of service in finding for the young man some well-paid employment.

Jabez came, and declared after some hesitation that he had an acquaintance who might be of use at Cheapside, but for so kindly obliging in this matter, he deemed a handsome remuneration necessary.

"You will not regret it, madam," he said pompously, "for the streets of London are lined with gold for those who know how to look."

Nan always disliked his pallid shifty face, and was inclined to draw back at this, but madam, who was full of enthusiasm for the project, closed at once with his offer, and paid a handsome sum down then and there.

A few weeks later Gilbert started for London on a smart black nag that his mother had purchased from a neighbouring farmer. He vowed laughingly that he would soon return and show

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

them at the Leas “ how a gentleman ought to live.” The two fond women hung upon his neck as he bade them good-bye—whilst he declared, like a high spirited lad, that it was no time for tears, for given a year or so he would soon be with them again, and with gold enough in his pocket to give them all the gewgaws and kick-shaws that they could name.

As Gilbert mounted and rode away, Madam Woolridge turned to hide her tears, but Nan ran after him, and as he turned the corner waved her pocket-handkerchief, crying out in her loud, kind guttural voice, “ Go and prosper lad,” and added huskily to herself, as he vanished out of her sight, “ God knows if aught went wrong with thee it would be the death of me.”

For some time the two fond hearts at the Leas received occasional letters from Gilbert, but never long or fully written, and after awhile the letters bore no address. Later on they noticed that the letters grew shorter and shorter, “ but the dear lad,” they declared, “ thought constantly of them,” for one day, by old Tims the carrier, there arrived a gold watch for his mother, and for Nan a handsome gold chain, and they both said what was lacking in penmanship was more than made up by the dear boy’s generous gifts.

“ Nobody can prosper more,” he once wrote, “ than I do. Fortune smiles upon me, and with

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

another year's good luck I hope to make all the money a gentleman need wish for, settle down at the Leas, and marry pretty cousin B.—the prettiest girl in Shropshire—God bless her!"

Madam Woolridge was delighted at this letter, and vowed that she was the happiest woman in the world—and declared that she would go down and drink a cup of Bohea with pretty Mistress Beatrice Lutwyche, and murmur and nod over half confidences and whispered understandings.

About this time the country rang with the exploits of a well-known and notorious highwayman. At one moment an audacious robbery was perpetrated in the neighbourhood of London, whilst only two days later Lord Derrington was robbed, apparently by the same hand, not far from Shrewsbury, whilst about to visit his daughter, Madam Corbet, at Hawes Park.

The affair made much stir in the county, and Squire Lutwyche rode over and had a long chat with old John Sedgrow as to how the Leas could best be defended if attacked by burglars. He inquired where Madam Woolridge kept her few valuables and pieces of plate, for it was said that Captain Black, as he was called, not only attacked travellers on the road, but also had several times entered houses successfully, and relieved wealthy citizens of their valuables, and robbed ladies of their jewels.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Madam Woolridge heard of these robberies, and was much agitated by the neighbours' stories. "I would I had my boy with me," she wailed. "He would know how to defend the house. I should be sorry, cousin," she said, "to lose my silver candlesticks and spoons, but it would be a sorrier matter for me to lose the watch my son sent me," and so speaking, Madam Woolridge led her cousin into her chamber, and showed him the watch in question, which had a diamond of some value in the centre.

"Gad, madam," said the squire, somewhat astonished, "Bertie must be doing well. It certainly is a fine thing for a young fellow to go to London and make a fortune, and stab my vitals if I don't send Dick and Ned up to town to do likewise. Master Jabez has found him a good berth." So saying the squire bowed himself out of madam's apartment and rode away. When he was gone madam sent for Nan.

"Nan," she said, "there are robbers and foot-pads and highwaymen abroad; but above all we must make sure that they steal not from us my Gilbert's gifts." So the two women hid the watch and the chain in a secret drawer in madam's escritoire, and as they did so they discussed the doings of Captain Black.

About a month after these events the country-

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

side again rang with the account of a daring and terrible robbery and duel.

It appeared that Lord Mentmore was travelling up to London with his chaplain and a suitable retinue, carrying with them some valuable plate and jewels. They stopped at Chester, and put up at the Oak Bough. His lordship, fearing to leave his chest containing the valuables in his coach whilst he was at supper, had it carried to his own bedroom, and gave orders to his valet, Philip Chambers, not to let the treasure go out of his sight.

The box, however, being very heavy, two men from outside were called up to convey the chest from the carriage, and whilst Lord Mentmore was at supper all three men remained standing chatting in the room together.

"Well," said one, a tall, swarthy fellow with a slouch, "gold is heavy and wants a lot of beer for lifting," and he laughed. Whereupon Philip graciously promised to treat them both later at the bar, and proceeded to dilate upon his master's possessions and state. In return the dark man volunteered to introduce him to Mistress Polly, the nymph of the bar, and so friendly intercourse was soon established between them.

Philip was a country servant, and in order to give his master what he considered his due, was easily led on to run on about his wealth, to

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

describe her ladyship's jewels, and to enlarge upon the splendour of the family he lived with.

"A handsome master and a likely man," said the dark man in the most obliging voice imaginable, "and I'm proud to know you, sir. Frank and free, no airs or graces, any one can see that you are a nobleman's body-servant."

Immediately afterwards the chaplain entered and told Philip he might go down for his supper.

The next morning, curiously enough, all the party awoke with headaches. "Strong canary," said his lordship ; "next time, chaplain, I'll drink my three bottles when I have not got her ladyship's jewels to look after."

At the signal given for departure Master Philip called for the two men who had carried in the chest to lift it back to the coach, but they could not be found.

"They be agone," said the ostler, a shrunken, wizened little piece of humanity who was cleaning down a young horse, "but I'll give 'em," he added, "whatever your honour pleases," and he held out his hand.

"Very good fellows, those mates of yours," said Philip, carelessly putting a coin in the ostler's hand. "I shall be pleased to meet them anywhere."

"As they will be, doubtless, sir, to see you,"

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

said the old man, and Philip thought he gave a chuckle as he returned to his horse-cleaning.

As they got into the coach Lord Mentmore called out to know if the pistols were loaded.

"Right, my lord," was his valet's reply ; "I saw to them—all three sets before I went to bed ; they are all primed."

So amidst an army of hangers-on, mine host of the Oak Bough bowing low, and a smile from the bright eyes of Mistress Polly, Lord Mentmore and his servants drove away.

The coach had started, owing to his lordship's indisposition, rather later than had been originally intended, and they were not able to get to the last stage till after dark. About a mile from the inn where they usually put up they passed along a road bordered on each side by a high paling. Suddenly one of the coach-horses slipped, and before a man could get down to see what had happened, the sharp crack of a pistol was heard. At the same moment the driver fell from the box. At this noise the horses began to plunge wildly, but Philip, who was a plucky fellow, seized upon the reins and managed to control them, and called stoutly upon the servants to stand by his lordship and not to lose their heads. Just then, however, five or six men in masks leapt out of the wood and cried out simultaneously, according to the account of the footmen, "Your money or your

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

life!" Seeing fresh antagonists, Lord Mentmore seized a pair of pistols from a leather case, jumped out of the carriage, and tried to fire them at the robbers. But the pistols were not loaded, and he stood unable to make any resistance.

"Stand and deliver!" cried a voice, and a young fellow, who seemed to be the leader of the highwaymen, dashed up on a sorrel mare.

"Fight me like a gentleman," cried Lord Mentmore desperately. "My pistols would not go off."

"Secure the lacqueys," said Captain Black. "My lord," he added, "I will oblige you like a gallant man." As he spoke, the captain leapt from his horse and pointing to a broad piece of turf by the side of the road, bid his lordship draw. The two men were soon engaged in a desperate duel. The peer defended himself gallantly, but he soon proved himself no match for his enemy's skill, and in a few moments Lord Mentmore was pricked through the right lung, and lay dying on the grass. "A gallant gentleman," said Captain Black, bowing courteously as he proceeded to wipe his sword and to call to Philip to dismount and bring out the treasure.

The ruffians filled some sacks which they carried before their horses with the valuables, and then like a flash of lightning disappeared through the darkness.

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

Philip a minute later called out the trembling chaplain, who had remained hidden in the coach, and with his aid lifted in his insensible master, but nothing could be done to restore his lordship to life, and by the time they reached the Three Feathers, his breathing had ceased.

The news of this daring robbery and duel spread like wildfire through the west. A great reward was set on Captain Black's head, and the sheriffs and justices of the peace were begged to combine together and assist in every possible way in the hunting down and apprehension of such notorious highwaymen. Such were the facts of the story recounted by Squire Lutwyche one afternoon to Madam Woolridge across her tea-table. The squire had been that day to a meeting of gentlemen at Shrewsbury, gathered together to aid the course of justice.

"We must all look out, madam," he had said as he put down his cup of Bohea ; "for the rogue sticks at nothing, and the success of his evil-doing will be an encouragement to all the scoundrels in the county. There is," he added after a pause, "one comfort ; the Government has placed so high a price upon the leader's head, that some fellow is sure soon to turn informer."

"I sincerely hope so, cousin," came from Madam Woolridge's lips, "for no place seems safe now. But I would my boy were back, for

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

then," she added, "I should have no cause for anxiety."

The next day that followed this conversation was a grey still day in early October. Mushrooms that year were very plentiful, and Madam Woolridge, accompanied by Nan, brought out a basket in the afternoon and were soon engaged in filling it for ketchup. The mushrooms in the soft mist almost looked like strings of pearls strewn in the lush aftermath. In the distance a patch of lovely autumn crocuses decked the meadow, whilst far away subdued lights rested on the Brown Clee and far hills. Suddenly a sound of a horse trotting unevenly and as if lame along the stony road was heard.

"Who is that?" cried Madam Woolridge to her maid.

Then Nan stood up, gaunt and tall, and putting her great brown hand across her eyes, exclaimed: "Sure enough it's Master Jabez. But what can he have come over here for?" she asked herself aloud, and then muttered, "more guineas like enough," and her face darkened.

Her mistress blushed, stooped to pick a mushroom, and did not answer.

A few minutes later Jabez cantered the old white beast to where Madam Woolridge was standing and dismounted by her side.

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

"I have to speak with you, madam," he said, "and what I have to say is of importance."

Madam Woolridge looked at him nervously and trembled with excitement and fear.

"Speak," she said, "Master Jabez, I care not what it is, so long as it is no harm to Gilbert that you have to tell me."

Under the fire of madam's eager eyes, Jabez hesitated and stammered. "I wish to speak with you alone," at last he said.

"Nan," called Madam Woolridge, "take these mushrooms to the kitchen and give John, Master Jabez's horse to see after."

When Nan was out of hearing, the widow turned anxiously to Jabez. "Speak!" she said, her voice trembling with excitement. "I can bear all, but I cannot bear suspense."

Jabez at this began to shuffle and to talk about a painful duty, and feared that he had but ill news, and after some minutes' hesitation broke at last to Madam Woolridge that Gilbert had got into trouble and wished once more to see his mother before he fled the country.

"He may be in trouble, but I can never believe that my boy has done anything disgraceful," exclaimed Madam Woolridge warmly.

"Young blood is hot," said the schoolmaster equivocally, "but tell me on what day will you see

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

him," and he peered at her out of his shifty grey eyes.

"He must not return here," said the mother, "for that might excite suspicion, but if you will name a night next week we might see each other. I must see him," she added passionately, "whatever he is in hiding. His offence can be nothing shameful. I know young men often fight duels, and sometimes even kill an adversary in the conflict. This is probably the cause of his enforced absence."

"Madam," replied Jabez, "it is not for me to recount your son's adventures. The young gentleman will, doubtless, himself explain his conduct to you when you meet. As your son's former preceptor," he added, "I shall do but my duty if I give him every opportunity of meeting you, his mother, before he leaves England."

At this, tears came into the widow's eyes, and she thanked Jabez fervently. "How can I thank you enough?" she cried. "Your love, Master Jabez, has guarded me from one villain who has sought to foul my husband's name, and now you bring me back my son to embrace before he leaves the kingdom. Master Jabez, I owe you much;" and as she spoke, she pressed his hand in tender gratitude.

Jabez averted his weak grey eyes from her gaze, and begged Madam Woolridge to believe that he

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

did but show a proper sense of her past kindness, and that all *he* could do was at her command, so they walked back together to the old manor-house, madam sobbing softly for the sorrow and the pity of it all.

Priscilla felt giddy and dazed. In the years gone by she had had sad experience of what life could be, led away from her husband and weighed down by perpetual anxiety, and she dreaded living again through a second such ordeal. But after the first burst of grief, Madam Woolridge regained control over herself.

"Let it be on the 14th October, a Friday, if you can so manage it, good friend," she said, "and let our meeting-place be the Major's Leap, on the Wenlock Edge. It is a desolate spot, and after dark nobody will be about there."

"I will give your message, madam," said Jabez, "and on Friday I promise you shall embrace once more your son;" and so saying he left her.

How Madam Woolridge crawled back to her chamber she hardly knew, for she felt sick at heart and crushed with the suddenness of the blow. She locked her chamber door, and then flung herself on her knees, and implored the aid of God.

She spoke to no one of her grief, not even to her cousins at the hall. Her news, like most

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

bad news, she argued, would wait, and nothing was ever gained by repeating evil tidings. She lived in hope that her boy would get safely out of the kingdom, and return later to Shropshire to gladden her old age.

Often over her embroidery frame her hands would rest, whilst she would say, with a pink flush in her cheek, and with all a mother's pride, "At least it can be nothing that can be a shame to his father's name."

On the day fixed Madam Woolridge feigned a headache, and remained in her bedroom till the evening, when she sent for Nan. On the arrival of that faithful servant she communicated to her her wishes. "No one knows," she said, "but I must see my boy. I can count on thee." Nan, for all reply, looked at her out of her loyal dog-like eyes. "Thou shalt lead old Gunpowder, and I will ride him on a sheepskin placed across his back as a saddle," continued Madam Woolridge. "I have put together a few things which we will take to my son—money, a little linen, and some food."

Nan bowed her head in acquiescence. "All shall be ready, my dear mistress," was her reply. "In half an hour it will be dark, and we will start; but I pray you first take food, for your eyes look red with weeping, and you seem but sadly, and God knows how you will grieve at parting

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

with your lad. You will want all the strength you can get."

At this madam bade her servant hasten all preparations, but commanded her to tell neither of her fellow servants anything ; "for above all," she said, "Master Jabez said I was to be as silent as the grave."

"You can count on me," was Nan's reply, "but I like not that Master Jabez has knowledge of this matter. He has a cunning, shifty face and seems to know of hidden doings."

"Rather thank God, woman," said Madam Woolridge testily, "that we have a friend as willing and capable as is Master Jabez. My poor boy is sadly in need of friends, and know that in such times as these, a poor widow finds the world a cold and desolate place."

Then Nan brought her food and drink, and when at first she would not partake of either, Nan whispered softly, "For Gilbert's sake." At this the two women's hearts overflowed as they had done years ago, but Nan said it was no time for tears, so they only pressed each other's hands tightly, whilst Nan said, "Take courage, all may yet come well, for fortune smiled at last upon his father." Then in silence Nan stole out and lighted the horn lantern that hung in the niche behind the back door ; unobserved she went out and saddled old Gunpowder and strapped the sheepskin on his

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

back. Then she led the horse round the garden across the meadow, avoiding the paths and the high-road so that there might be no sound of horses' feet, and she kept in the shadow of the high hedge so that they could not be seen from the house.

The night was cloudy and a small drizzling rain fell incessantly. At the second gate Nan awaited her mistress, as they had agreed beforehand. Mistress Woolridge stood calm, but shivering from cold, her arms full of packages. "I pray God I may embrace my poor lad before he goes," she said.

Nan lifted up the little lady on the skin as if she had been a child and tenderly pinned a shawl round her knees.

"Keep up a brave heart," she murmured, "and please God we will have him with us yet. Young blood in the Quality," she pursued, "must fight same as young cocks, for the Almighty made 'em so," for Nan thought, like her mistress, that Gilbert's enforced flight arose from the consequences of a duel; "we'll have him back again a bit later." Then she broke out, hope striving in her voice, "Let us only think of seeing his young face again—sure his smile will be like seeing God's light to sore een."

Madam Woolridge nodded and smiled through her tears, and in spite of the damp chill evening

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

took heart. Yes, the cloud would go as it had gone before in her husband's life, she pondered. It was a time of anxiety and sorrow now, she mused, but a time of happiness and ease would follow, and she would yet live to be an old woman and to see her son happily married to his pretty cousin Beatrice, and hear the prattle of her grandchildren at her knee in her old age, and as they neared the spot of meeting the tender soul grew light-hearted. "At least," she said to herself, "I can tell him I was always proud of his gift. Dear, generous-hearted boy, to think of how he must have hoarded up his money week after week to spend on an old woman like me. Well, his presents will always recall the dear giver, and when I hold his watch in my hand I can always say, 'Tick not, little watch, for you at least have still happy hours to recount.'"

As they approached the spot where Gilbert was to meet them, Nan looked round anxiously to see that the coast was clear. It was very still on the hill-top ; not a sound anywhere.

The trees frowned dark and grim against the sullen sky, and the moon was half obscured by clouds. "We must mind where us walks," said Nan, "for there be pits where they have worked the lime, and the brambles be high at the top end where the rough grass grows. Sure this be lonely enough ; nought but a ghost could walk here," and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

as she spoke she led old Gunpowder, carefully threading her way across the broken ground. Her mistress grew excited and almost happy at the thought of seeing her son so soon again, and rattled on about the gifts that she had brought him—the golden guineas that she had saved, the pigeon pasty, and the bottle of red wine. “We have not come empty-handed,” the little lady ended by saying. At that moment they climbed the summit of the ridge known in the country as Wenlock Edge. Just below them the hill fell away in a precipitous declivity, a fall of some thirty feet, whilst all round grew a thick tangle of oak and hazel scrub.

“I hear som’un,” murmured Nan, and an instant later a young man dashed up to them on a panting steed.

Without a word he leapt from his horse, lifted the little lady from the sheepskin saddle, and pressed her to his heart.

“Mother! mother!” he cried, and then began to weep and tremble like a girl.

Then Madam Woolridge entreated him not to grieve. “It cannot be as bad as all this, dear lad, for surely no son of mine,” she said, “can have done aught unmanly or unbefitting the calling of a gentleman. Young blood is hot, I know, but it is not in you to do anything that could cause

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

your mother to blush. You could not rob, or thieve, or lie."

To this Gilbert answered nothing, but continued to turn his head away.

"Let me see you, my beautiful boy," pursued his mother proudly; "how handsome you are, and how tall you have grown—every inch a gentleman." Then Nan came up and cast her great brown arms around Gilbert's neck and kissed him.

"Corporal Dick," said the young man with a dry laugh, "I owe you much, and whatever happens I know you will stand by my mother and comfort her, even if the worst comes."

To this Nan replied, "I'd die for you, my lad, or for my lady. You're all the world to me, and any one as injured either of ye would have to reckon with Corporal Dick," and asshe spoke Nan laughed grimly, and clasped tightly together her gigantic brown hands.

Then Madam Woolridge brought out her little gifts with housewifely pride and tried to induce her son to accept her little store of gold. But Gilbert would not take her guineas. "You will need them, dear mother, more than I do," he said, and slipped them back into her reticule.

Then she pressed upon him food and drink, and these he accepted smiling, saying, "None can make a pasty to match the Leas recipe." At this Madam Woolridge blushed like a girl with pride,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

for in those days ladies prided themselves on having a cool hand in the making of pastry, and in being well versed in all arts connected with the still-room.

A few minutes later, and Gilbert drew his watch from his pocket and put it to his ear.

"I have many miles to go on my good mare," he said, "and, dear mother, not even for you may I linger here." Then after a pause he added, "Whatever happens, tell me that I have your blessing and your love."

Then Madam Woolridge laid her hands on her son's shoulder. "God bless thee, my boy, and protect thee, and rest assured that no one can close thy mother's heart to thee," and she kissed him softly. For a moment mother and son stood clasped in a tender embrace.

Suddenly through the wood there came the sound of a long, low whistle, and at the same moment a hailstorm of bullets whizzed through the air. With a cry of pain the beautiful chestnut mare reared frantically, broke the rein by which Gilbert had held her, and then rushed to the verge of the precipice, and a second afterwards leapt madly over. A moment later and they heard the sound of a heavy fall.

"Mount! mount!" cried Nan, for Gilbert in his alarm for his mother had thought only of her safety. Nan pushed him frantically aside and

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

hurried up old Gunpowder. "I will see after madam," she said. "In God's name escape whilst you still can." In the distance they could hear something kicking frantically below, and that uttered cries of pain. "Mount! mount!" reiterated Nan, but Gilbert would not move, for he feared that his mother had been hit by a bullet.

"Only say that you are not hurt, mother," he murmured. Madam Woolridge tried to speak, but her tongue refused to utter any words.

Whilst they thus stood side by side, swiftly ten men emerged from the thicket. Gilbert at their approach drew his sword and tried to cut his way on foot.

"Back, dogs!" he cried, "or I will kill every mother's son of you."

With a yell of rage the constables leapt upon him, and one of them disabled him completely by shooting him through the right hand.

Madam Woolridge, aghast at what had happened, at last recovered her voice and called out, "There is some mistake, gentlemen. He is my son."

"Right enough, lady!" came back the reply from one of the constables. "He may be your son, but sure enough he's also Captain Black, and the captain's a gentleman we have all been long awaiting for. He's been on our list a long while." Then seeing that Gilbert was disarmed, he added,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"Come, mates, bring up the bracelets." In a minute some heavy irons were put on Gilbert's wrists. This done they were about to hustle him off when Gilbert turned and said courteously, "One moment, gentlemen. Allow me to say good-bye to my mother."

"Right you are, captain," said the constable in command. "A gentleman born you were, and a gentleman you'll be till the last leap. Anything in reason to oblige."

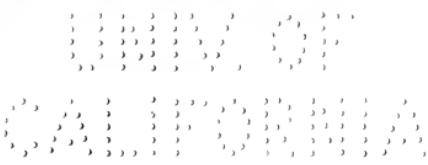
Then Gilbert stepped aside to his mother. "Good-bye, dear," he said, "there is much to forgive, but God knows it was not all my fault ;" and he kissed her solemnly and wrung Nan's hand. Then he turned towards the group of constables and said : "Will some gentleman do me a favour, and that is to despatch my horse ? I hear her moaning below. Poor Whirlwind, it is the last act of grace that I can do for thee," and a tear stood in his eye. Then without another word he allowed himself to be lifted on a feeble old dun horse and led away under a strong escort of constables.

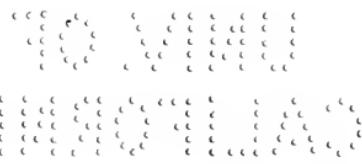
Nan sprang after her young master, and forcing her way to his side, whispered : "I will find who has snared thee in this net, and as God is in Heaven, he shall have to reckon with me."

"Back, woman !" cried the head official ironically ; "for surely the captain will not want a



WENLOCK EDGE.





THE MAJOR'S LEAP

pretty wench like thee to guide him in his last journey." At this sally all laughed but Gilbert, who paid no heed.

"Think only of my mother!" he said, "she will need all thy devotion."

At this Nan stopped and was about to retrace her steps, when she looked up the hill, attracted by a noise, and saw a horseman riding towards the party at a furious rate.

"Old Tantivy won't be left," said one of the men laughing. "Master Jabez tried two fields ago to get him away, but the old horse would be in at the death. The schoolmaster," he continued, "is as afraid of bullets as a wild drake of shot at Christmastide. Had you seen him walloping the old horse, and the old horse as determined as a Roman to have his own way, you would have split your sides with laughing; as I could have done if I hadn't been on the track of Captain Black, but that was too serious a pursuit for merriment, so I spanked along, and let the old 'uns settle the job between them. But here he is. Well, Master Trantor, how are you?" he called out.

As he approached, the schoolmaster groaned aloud. "It will be," he cried, "a long time before I ride such an unmannerly steed again. I would have you to know," he added furiously, hearing the guffaw of laughter that greeted his arrival, "that my life has been in danger. However, you

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

have the captain," and his eye rested on Gilbert tied on the dun horse.

"Secure as in jail," replied one of the constables. "The gold will be yours, Master Jabez, certain as sheep turns to mutton, although we got the knocks —more shame." Then some one flicked up the old dun horse, and the party vanished in the darkness.

Nan stood watching them, a fierce light in her eyes. She now knew who had betrayed her dear master. A wild hatred burnt in her breast—she clenched her fist as the party rode off into the darkness. It was a great brown fist and had the strength of a strong man's. "Madam shall know nothing," she cried, "but I will avenge him. Jabez, thou hast to reckon with me."

Then Nan silently retraced her footsteps. She found that her mistress had fainted on the grass, whilst Gunpowder was drowsily engaged in grazing by her side, munching greedily the scanty herbage. Nan broke the bottle of wine which lay a little way off, and poured some of its contents down her mistress's throat. "We must go home, madam," she said.

"There is nothing left for me to live for," wailed the broken-hearted mother. "Let me lie and die here."

"I have still work to do," said Nan grimly, and

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

then she lifted her mistress gently in her arms and placed her on old Gunpowder's back.

It was almost in silence that the two women returned to the old manor-house. Madam Woolridge scarcely spoke. She seemed crushed by the weight of her sorrow. All she did was to moan aloud from time to time: "They will hang my boy! they will hang my boy;" and "Oh, my God, I cannot save him!"

On their arrival at the Leas, Nan put her mistress tenderly to bed and offered her some food on a tray, but madam turned her face to the wall and declined to eat. When Nan pressed her, she said: "It is all over, my good wench; it's best for a poor soul like me to die. Why should the poor gnarled trunk remain when the fairest tree of the forest has fallen?"

Towards the dawn, Nan tried to rouse her from her apathy. She bethought herself of Gilbert's gifts. She unlocked the escritoire and proceeded to bring out the watch which she laid in her mistress's hand. As she did so she said, "Rouse yourself;" but the mother only shook her head.

"Poor watch," she said, "it may now strike no more happy hours—only hours of sin and sorrow for me;" and a few seconds later the watch slipped from her feeble hands and lay shattered on the floor.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

So she remained almost unconscious for many days and scarcely partook of food or drink in spite of Nan's entreaties.

On the fourteenth day after the arrest, a farmer of the neighbourhood called to say that the execution would take place on the morrow, at Shrewsbury.

Madam Woolridge was very weak, for she had hardly taken any nourishment and her heart was broken by her grief.

When Nan told her the farmer's message she cried out, however : "I must go and see my lad ; surely they will let me see my boy once more before the end," and Priscilla attempted to rise. But she was too weak to attempt the journey, for on leaving her bed she fell and lay long in a fainting fit.

When Madam Woolridge came to, Nan, seeing how ill she was, pressed her to make her will. "As thou wilt, Nan," replied her mistress. "I will write a paper and leave all to thee. It is not much that I have, but it will keep thee in affluence till the end."

But Nan scouted the idea. "What should I live as a lady for," she asked indignantly ; "I who have lived all my life as a working woman ? One cannot change in middle life. Rather leave what thou hast, madam, to pretty Mistress Beatrice.

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

She is a pretty and gentle lass, and the dear lad always loved her."

Then Madam Woolridge wrote feebly and in a trembling hand a paper to the effect that all her goods, plate, linen, and china, and two farms near Bridgnorth and a few fields at Church Preen should go to her cousin, Mistress Beatrice Lutwyche, daughter of Squire Lutwyche of Lutwyche, and of Phœbe Anne Sybella, his wife, in the county of Salop. This document she duly signed in the presence of old John and of her faithful maid.

"I should have had more to leave," Madam Woolridge told Nan a little later, "but I have been obliged for many years to give much of my income as hush-money. I have entrusted the same to Master Jabez Trantor. It was not for himself, he said, but to silence the evil tongue of one who possessed letters and papers of my husband which might have cast a slur upon his good name. So in fear I paid him, and being a man of covetous appetite, my little store has grown ever smaller."

"I will settle with him to-morrow," said Nan to herself; "to-morrow we will owe him nothing." Madam Woolridge did not notice Nan's fierce expression of hatred. A little while afterwards she said: "I pray thee take Master Trantor my lad's gift, for though broken, it is of gold and there-

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

fore of value. He meant kindly by me when he strove that I and my son should meet."

"He shall have his deserts as God is in Heaven!" said Nan in a hollow voice. "But now, madam, I pray you write on a sheet of paper that you are sending me with a gift, and that you desire that Master Trantor should come and meet me at an appointed hour and day; and I beseech you," she added, "name a silent and lonely place for this your last commission, for I have no heart to go to Much Wenlock town, for there the boys shout and make faces at me and call out rude gibes, and if I were to carry a gift through the streets there, a hundred rude eyes would peer upon me, and perchance some rude fingers touch his gift."

Then Madam Woolridge again took a pen in hand and wrote in a faint, shaky handwriting a letter to Master Trantor, in which she told him of her proposed gift.

"It is a curious watch of costly workmanship," she wrote, "and shall be delivered into your own hands by my faithful and attached waiting-woman to-morrow. Would," madam wrote, "it were of greater value, but although broken, it is of pure gold—any way, for my poor lad's sake, I know you will prize and cherish it."

"Now, madam, name the hour," said Nan, who was standing beside her mistress's bedside, "and let it be at dusk or later."

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

Then Madam Woolridge added to her letter : "I pray you, good sir, come at the hour of nine by the clock," and appealed to Nan to settle the place where she and Master Trantor were to meet.

"Let it be where they caught him—above the Major's Leap," said Nan in a strange husky voice. Then madam wrote, but more feebly than ever, the site indicated by her servant.

After the letter was signed and sealed, Madam Woolridge turned to Nan. "Kiss me, dear," she said, "for God knows I owe thee much."

"You shall owe me still more," was Nan's reply, but very sadly, for her heart was filled with sorrow at the thought that her mistress had not long to live, and she loved her mistress exceedingly.

"And now," pursued Madam Woolridge after a pause, "I am very weary, but God, I think, in His mercy will take my soul to-night, for I have prayed Him in His pity not to let me see the dawn."

Then Nan wrapped her mistress tenderly amongst the sheets, held her hand and murmured, "God grant you meet Him in glory."

All that long and weary night Nan sat up by Madam Woolridge's bedside and watched her sleeping. The tired head rested peacefully amongst the pillows, and gradually there came across the face a look of holy calm. "God in His mercy has taken His lamb," and Nan putting

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

her hand upon her mistress's hand and brow found both stone cold.

Nan looked at her mistress with envy, but never for a moment hesitated as regarded the purpose she had in view. "I have much work to do," she said, and then added bitterly to herself, "Ah, happy are the folk that can die at peace. But for my dear lad's sake it must be," and her face flushed crimson with pride.

Nan was untutored and uneducated although a woman of loyal heart, and the remembrance of how Gilbert had been betrayed filled her with thoughts of the fiercest hatred. "I am God's avenger," she cried. As she said this she knelt down by the bed and prayed for strength—"Strength," she cried, "to carry out my job."

After this she went into the garden and plucked a handful of rosemary and of lemon-sage. It was now late autumn, and there were no flowers left, for early frosts had ruined the borders; but she plucked a handful of fragrant herbs, and these she laid reverently in her mistress's cold hands. A little later she told the cook-maid that her mistress was dead, but that by her last desire she "was going to leave a letter on Master Trantor."

When Nell, the cook-maid, heard this, she began to weep and to wring her hands, upon which Nan gave her words of comfort, and then, taking down her tall staff from the kitchen corner,

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

trudged down the road to Wenlock with Madam Woolridge's last letter.

She found Master Jabez at the house, and after he had read the letter he thanked her effusively. He then asked her after her mistress's health, and expressed a hope that she would bear up in spite of the trial and sorrow of the times, and ended by sniffing out something about his offering a not unworthy prayer on her behalf.

Hearing this an ugly gleam shot from Nan's grey eyes. She did not, however, betray herself ; all she said was, "I will come, sir, to the Major's Leap at the hour named, but my mistress will be no better nor no worse for any prayers that any folk can say, for she died at dawn this morning."

At this Jabez broke out into lamentations, crying out "that he had lost his best and dearest friend," and calling upon heaven to witness how great and dire was his distress at the death of the mother and approaching fate of the young gentleman—his former pupil.

Nan made no reply save that she looked at him out of half-closed eyes, and repeated slowly, "I will bring you the watch, sir. It shall be yours to-night."

"At nine, then, my good woman, I will meet thee," said Jabez, quickly ; "and if thou wantest a recommendation, or a word of praise for past services, it will be a pleasure for me to give it."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

And he watched her pass up the High-street leaning heavily on her stick, as she vanished out of sight.

Nan bent her eyes upon the ground. "God give me grace to pay thee back in thine own coin," she murmured, as she walked on. With steady tread, and never pausing to gaze at the view, or to diverge from her path, Nan returned to the Leas, and called for meat and beer. Her fellow servants were shocked by her large appetite, and her apparent lack of feeling, but when Nell hesitated about fetching another glass of beer Nan burst out with, "I tell thee, wench, I must have meat and drink, for I have still hard work to do."

After eating and drinking copiously, Nan once more sought the darkened chamber where her mistress lay. She did not, however, remain there longer than a few minutes—only during sufficient time to take one transparent white hand and to say, "Our laddie has strong arms to avenge him," and then she took out the shattered watch from the escritoire, and tied it up neatly with a blue ribbon in a piece of paper, and brought out also the chain that Gilbert had sent her.

For half a moment she hesitated whether she would not send the chain to pretty Mistress Beatrice, but in an instant her decision was made

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

and she put it round her neck, saying, "Nay, nay, I will wear it round my neck, for it will help me to do to-night's work." Then she left the silent, darkened room, and sought her own little white-washed humble chamber in the attics, and took down from a peg the old officer's coat that she had worn on the day that she had come to the Leas—and she put it on. "I have more space to pull and to hold in this than in any woman's garb," she said; and after that she sat down on her bed, and all the afternoon she hummed and croaked to herself of the old days, and recalled to mind the death of her own boy.

"Would that God had taken them both!" she cried bitterly. Then she sang her old half-forgotten songs, and with strange fixed gaze looked out of the little glimmering panes to the far hills away to the west, which lay fading fast in the dying daylight.

As eight struck by the parlour clock she started up and stole downstairs. Noiselessly she slipped into the kitchen, and her eye fell upon a knife on the table. She was half inclined to slip it under the folds of her cloak, but refrained from doing so, for she said, "My hands are strong enough to do what my heart desires, and so trouble will be saved, and shame to others. What do I want with life," Nan cried, "now that master and mistress are both gone?"

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Nan had the nature of a dog, and to her life meant little now that she had not her dear ones with her.

Some one tried to stop her in the passage, but Nan paid no heed, and strode on into the night.

It was a cheerless evening ; cold, chill rain was falling in torrents, and every now and then gusts of fitful wind swept across her face and uncovered head.

Above, the trees in the hedgerows creaked and swayed, and the leaves from the ash and oak flew in sullen eddies round and round her as she made her way by lane and field to the Edge Ridge. She held her staff tightly and walked straight forward with a great swinging stride. Every now and then, in spite of the rain, the heavens would lighten, for the moon at intervals would shine out faintly between the clouds. The lanes and paths swam in wet, but Nan put her feet down firmly and never slackened her pace or tripped. As the Major's Leap was neared Nan's great brown hands tightened on her stick. She paused as some sound caught her ear, looked down into the darkness below and listened intently.

Suddenly through the silence of the lonely hill-side she discerned a moving light coming towards her, which twinkled and glittered like a star over the grass. "God grant he come alone," said Nan through her set teeth, and then she fell a-whistling

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

a few bars of an old chanty that she used to sing to the boys at the Leas years ago. A few minutes later Master Jabez reached the summit of the steep ascent, but puffing and blowing sorely, for he had walked from the town in a heavy overcoat.

Nan moved down a few paces to meet him.

"Art there, woman?" he cried.

Then Nan came out of the darkness and stood by him, a tall, gaunt figure, strangely clad in a short petticoat and an officer's coat.

"Thou hast got the watch?" he inquired.
"Give it quickly, for the night is dark and wet,
and it is an evil job standing here."

"It is an evil job standing here," repeated Nan
in her strange, deep, husky voice.

Jabez held out his hand. "I will put it in my pocket," he said. Then, whilst she was searching her pocket, Jabez fell a-talking. "Gilbert was always a wild lad," he said; "hot blood and mad spirits. I did what I could, but London is a wild place for a hot-headed youth. I had my doubts for some time. Madam his mother gave me no news, but tongues were agog at the taverns, and stories flewabout before the whole truth was known. For there's no fire without some smoke."

"You knew it then?" said Nan in her deep voice.

"Knew it, of course I did, my good woman;

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

but give me the watch. I am wet to the skin, drenched like an otter that has swum the ford ; if thou wantest to hear of the mad doings of thy favourite it must be another time."

"Here is the watch," cried Nan. As she spoke the watery moon for a single instant shone out clear and full, lit up her face and flashed for a second on the watch that she held in her hand.

There must have been something terrible in her eyes, for Jabez started back with a sharp cry of terror, and said, "Enough, give it to me and I will go."

But Nan, roused to fury, cried out, "Take it, and may God give thee thy deserts."

Jabez grew deathly pale and remained shivering in the sodden grass. He did not dare take the trinket, but wondered dimly how he might pacify her.

"I did but do my duty," he said. "Gilbert was a malefactor. If I had not given him up to the authorities other folks would."

But Nan would hear no more ; his allusions to Gilbert filled her with a wild frenzy. "To-night thou diest," she said. "I am his avenger."

Then Jabez sought to coax her from her purpose. "Only let me go in peace," he pleaded, "and thou shalt keep the watch for thyself, good wench. Thou canst sell it, and its price

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

will buy thee a husband, or provide for thy old age."

But Nan's mind was made up. With a yell of fury she cried out, "Base hound, thou diest to-night, come what may."

Jabez, seized with terror, tried to evade her grasp, and sought to escape by running down the hill, but before he had gone but a very few paces Nan had swept him into her terrible arms and carried him shivering with fear to the top of the hill again. He bit and scratched like a cat in the jaws of a mastiff, but he was powerless against her strength. Her great brown hands held him as in an iron vice. He whimpered and snuffled, promising her everything that he could think of if she would but let him go free.

"I will refuse thee nothing," he whispered, "and I am rich. I will provide for thee amply, only spare my life."

Nan gave him no answer. Her heart beat like a sledge-hammer as she bore him up the ascent, panting under his weight and filled with a fierce burning hatred.

"To-night! to-night!" she cried, and a wild mirthless laugh burst from her lips. "Mother and son, maid and rogue—all stiff and cold—all alike—all food for the worms." Then she approached the abyss, and held her victim over the chasm.

"If thou art going to kill me, for God's sake do

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

it quickly," cried Jabez, sobbing as a frightened child.

At this Nan only laughed, and replied, "Thou shalt know death first in thy soul."

Then, holding Jabez in her arms with the strength of a giantess, she sang in her strange deep sepulchral voice the old chanty that she used to sing to her own boy, and Gilbert years ago. A frightened owl passed with a scream into the darkness. At last the voice died away, and then came a lull.

"Take and hold thy watch," said Nan grimly, "for I will rob no man."

Mechanically Jabez's cold clammy hands closed on the shattered watch, then Nan said, pulling herself up straight, in spite of the weight she bore in her arms, like a soldier on parade, "Let the God of Hosts judge," and for a second she held her breath. Then clasping the man tight to her breast in a convulsive embrace, she leapt far into the darkness over the chasm.

The next day, two woodsmen who were felling trees in the copse-wood below, happened to walk near the spot.

"By gum!" said one, "sure enough there be a bundle of rags or a sack," and he pointed to the chasm below.

Together the two men scrambled down to ascertain what the heap consisted of. As they

THE MAJOR'S LEAP

came nearer, they distinguished a man and woman, both dead and cold, but still tightly locked in each other's arms.

"Lor!" said the younger, meditatively, "who would have thought it? 'Tis old Nan and Jabez. I never thought as they two were sweethearts. Now, sure, if I was walkin' with a lass, I'd choose a safer place for courtin' in—or a better lookin' lass—for the Major's Leap be the most dangerous spot on the whole Edge."

So were the two bodies found, and thus did Nan avenge her young master.

CHRIST'S TREE

ON the road to Harley from Much Wenlock there still stands an old thatched cottage. It faces a farm known as Newtown. Before it runs the road, and the little homestead stands perched on a quaint picturesque bank, high above the thoroughfare. A narrow but sheltered strip of garden stretches to the south, and neat little beds of old-fashioned flowers blaze annually in the summer sun. In front of the cottage door there is a trim paved path of small pebbles neatly wedged into the soil. Before the house, forming a natural porch, grew in former years a gigantic elder-bush. Little is changed in the appearance of cottage or garden, save that the elder-tree no longer grows there.

In the year 1796, one fine October morning, Joan Hamnett was busily engaged at her wash-tub. The day was singularly mild and balmy, as she stood before her cottage door wringing out the clothes.

“ ‘Tis a pretty day,” said the honest dame, looking round, “and when I gets these here

CHRIST'S TREE

clothes upon a line, I'll see about the elder-wine." As she spoke, she looked up at the dark clusters of elderberries, which hung like grapes over her head. "Shoo! shoo!" she cried, and clapped her hands, as a robin tried to perch on a twig and steal some of the fruit. Then Joan, after finishing her washing, went into her cottage, and brought out a few old claret bottles, which Phil Bebb, her cousin, who worked at the Fox, had begged from the landlady.

"Them 'ull do nicely," she said complacently, and washed them out carefully, and then set them in the sun to dry. "My man, and the lads, they does like a sip of summat tasty come Christmastide, when the snow lies sheet-like on the ground. And sure, a hot drink then be the best night-cap as workin' folks can have," and the good dame laughed cheerily aloud. As she thus mused, Joan heard footsteps, and looking up, saw her husband, Reuben Hamnett, and her two sons, Aaron and David.

"Well, missus," cried her husband in his big jolly voice, "sure I hope 'tis somethin' toothsome as yer got for us to eat. I've been hackin' at the squire's trees since dawn, and Aaron's been hackin' too, whilst t' little chap," pointing to David, "have a-been a-trimming undergrowths into faggots, and fair clemmed we be. But lor, 'tis good in the woods, dry and pretty. We seed the

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

fox steal away, with the hounds close behind him, and I hope, now, Mrs. Dangers will have less to complain of, on the score of her turkeys and hen-roost ; but lor, the little red 'uns they do fair swarm in the Edge Wood, same as fleas on Bob Dyke's pup."

" Sit down, maister," cried Joan ; " there's toad-in-the-hole, beans with a snap of drippin', and apple puffs," and she opened her oven with pride and displayed her dishes.

Reuben and his sons sat down at table. Aaron, the eldest, had a striking face. He was of unusual height and breadth, and was the pride of his mother's heart. He could wrestle with most in the county at the fairs, it was said, and had a great reputation for strength and daring. Father and son worked for the farmers during the hay and corn harvests, and during the autumn and winter months earned their livelihood in felling trees, in stripping bark, and in sorting the brushwood into faggots.

Reuben had a good-natured, kindly face and a complexion that a girl might have envied, so clear and fresh was it, and a loud, genial voice. He had an unbounded belief in his wife's capabilities and powers. " The missus," he was wont to say, " can do most things as a Christian woman should. She can bake with any. At the farms there be none as can touch her soul-cakes, or top her home-made



THE ELDER TREE IN BLOSSOM.



CHRIST'S TREE

beer, cowslip, or elderberry wine, primrose vinegar, or gooseberry syrup. There's some," he would say, "as marry for looks; but give me a handy wench, 'tis two miles out of the four as a man has to walk in a day." And then he would add, "My missus she washes for the parson, and plucks poultry for Mistress Wycherley at the Abbey Farm, and they jobs they bring her in a pretty penny, but, God bless her, she's welcome to it all," and honest Reuben would put down his mug Saturday nights at the Plough, and look defiantly round, and challenge any one to contradict him. But Reuben was big, and burly, and seldom therefore got contradicted, as was the way then, and doubtless is the way now, in spite of the Education Act and general progress.

His son Aaron was not unlike him in build and figure, but his eye had not the same frank and open expression, and he often had a heavy, sullen manner when anything put him out of temper, and occasional mad outbursts of rage, when unusually excited or under the influence of drink.

"He be big enough to draw Farmer Milner's waggon," his father would say of him, "but if Waggoner Dykes wanted to go one way and Aaron t'other, God help the waggoner, for Aaron would hurl hisself over the Edge rather than be gainsaid, such be his variable temper."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

David was therefore his favourite son. David was a slender youth of sixteen years, with light brown hair and mild hazel eyes. "Soft as a girl, winning and kindly," Reuben would say, "and with a pretty pipin' voice in talkin'." According to his father's account David had been "delicate as a little 'un, and when a small chap had begged books off the curate"; and although Reuben would say, "He works well; larnin' will stick same as ways of Quality burr to a waitin'-woman. But, lor bless yer!" he would add hopefully, "I think as the woods and the fields will get rid of his larnin' same as twins and the turkeys got rid of Mistress Jones' Quality mincings after she had a-married Farmer Tydder." And Reuben would sum up the position with good-natured contempt. "Us don't want larnin' on the land," he would say, "for sure when it comes it will be the end of dacent work——"

As the day was warm the cottage door was left open during the repast, and as the three men sat at table they saw the clothes hanging out on the line, a patch of stocks blazing in the sunlight, and heard a robin sing.

"Listen, mother!" said David suddenly, "how sweet it sings. 'Tis the Lord's own bird, and the only one that sings in autumn. It seems like spring," he said dreamily, "he sings so sweet and clear."

CHRIST'S TREE

"Thee eat thy meat," snapped Aaron. "'Tis naught but a nesh one, mother," he said; "soon tired, allus gadding with his eyes, same as a maid who is seeking her sweetheart."

"Let the young 'un be," said Reuben good-naturedly. "Thee has sinew for two, lad, but thy brother will come to, after a bit. 'Tisn't every chap as can heave like a team of bullocks. Thee must make, Aaron, allowances for the lad. He war never strong and he have a-tried to make up with book-larnin'."

At this the mother and eldest son laughed contemptuously.

"It does for the Quality as can afford it, does larnin'," exclaimed Aaron, "but, Lord love yer, whoever heard of makin' money by readin' books? Now give me a strong arm;" and as he spoke he pulled up his sleeve and bared his arm with pride.

"Aye, lad," said Joan admiringly, "a strong arm and a big frame, these be the things as make a man—bone and money," and she heaped upon his plate another ample helping from the pie-dish.

Then David flushed red. "Some day," he said, with a catch in his throat, "I'll do somethin' else beside bein' strong. There be good stuff in books even if 'em don't mean money; at least, readin' makes a fellow happy."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

But this statement seemed too dangerous to Reuben to remain unanswered.

"Keep in your place, lad," he said solemnly. "Politics for the squire, the land for the farmers, and an honest mug of ale for such as thou and me. And so the world will work well. When such as thee and me begin *to think*, 'tis the end of decent livin' and sure disaster; low wages and dear bread will foller. The Lords and the gentry they don't need knowledge, they can pay to do without it; the farmers they've got the land, and it won't serve them. 'Tis only lawyers, clerks and schoolmasters as be a paid for it as should have it. Don't thee fly into the face of Providence—knowledge where 'tain't wanted be like breeding weather in December. It be indecent, and audacious, and heinous in the sight of honest folk. But now, missus," he cried, "time's running like water through a mill-dam where the hatch be up, and afore I gets back to the woods, what can I do for thee? Can I carry a bucket of water to the pig-sty, or shall one of us hoe up a row of taters for to-morrow's dinner?"

"Nay, Reuben," was Joan's answer; "but if thou'l't climb the ladder and get the fruit off the elder-bush, I'll take it kindly, for the little darkies be a bit out of reach, and this afternoon I wants to get they for our Christmas supper-wine."

"Right thee be, missus," replied her husband

CHRIST'S TREE

cheerily. "I'll bide a bit and send on the lads. Sharpen up the axe, Aaron," he called, "and remember thee must not cut the hollies, such be the squire's own orders." Then turning to David, Reuben laid his hand for a moment on his shoulder and added : "I'll make a man of thee yet, lad, so that thou'll rejoice thy mother's heart, for us mustn't grow lap-dogs in workin' men's houses."

A minute later and the two young men went out.

"Drat that there robin," cried Aaron on the threshold, pointing to a brilliant robin-redbreast who was taking his fill of the elderberries ; and as he spoke Aaron stooped down, picked up a pebble from the border outside and threw it at the bird. An instant afterwards a little mass of feathers fell at his feet.

"Oh brother, what hast thou done ?" exclaimed David in a remorseful tone. "It is the Lord's bird."

"Then let the Lord take care of 'un," was the rough rejoinder. "The beast wouldn't have caught it if it hadn't been thievin'."

"Good luck !" broke in Dame Hamnett, turning pale, "whichever of yer it be, it means a sad run of ill-luck. Enough," she added trembling, "to swing a squire's family."

Then Reuben, hearing the discussion, strode out and called after his sons who were walk-

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

ing away : “ Have a care, for him as kills a robin ‘treads down the path for a devil to enter.’ ‘Tis an old sayin’, but ‘tis true as gospel.”

Aaron only scowled in reply.

“ Dost hear ?” cried his father angrily, and then half to himself he added, “ The death of a robin stirs up ill—ill same as the drinkin’ of spirits at a fair.”

At this Aaron paused, and then turned on his heel and called out in a rage : “ Lot of rubbish thee and mother holds to—naught but a pack of lies fit for old gossips’ pates, but such stuff bain’t for the heads of strong men like me.”

David looked at his brother and then broke forth with : “ Some terrible thing will happen sure as God’s in heaven, for ‘tis an accursed thing to slay a robin.”

“ Tut, tut,” laughed Aaron boldly ; “ what’s done be done, and not all the gentry can give back the life to that dead bird,” and he walked away. As he disappeared from sight his mother followed him admiringly with her eyes.

“ Lord love ‘im,” she murmured, “ there goes a man. Proud as a king and strong as Parson Jack’s black horse.”

But her husband did not respond. The old belief of evil arising from the death of a robin was strong within him. He stooped down and silently picked up the little corpse. “ A bad job ! a bad

CHRIST'S TREE

job!" he said at last. "Let Aaron say what he will, for the Lord he's like a lawyer; He don't forget, come what may," and Reuben laid down the dead bird on a tuft of marjoram. After a little while, however, he brightened up. "Come, missus," he cried, "look alive, for I be due in the woods shortly."

Then the two went to the little outhouse where a few fowls roosted, adjoining the pig-sty, and brought out a ladder.

"He be a bit rickety and not over safe," said Joan ruefully.

"A done with thy fidgets, dame," replied Reuben tartly. "I be as good a man as ever I war, and what war good enough for my father be good enough for me"; so saying he placed the ladder up against the wall and proceeded to mount it.

"I'd best hold it," said Mistress Hamnett.

"Let be," grunted her husband. "I be right enough; safe as a lamb in a fold-yard. Fetch a basket for them berries; that's the best job as thou canst do."

"As thou wilt, Reuben," replied Joan. "Hamnetts be masterful men," and so saying she went to look below the oak dresser to find her basket.

Hardly, however, had she left his side when she heard the sound of a heavy thud upon the pavement, followed by a quick succession of

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

groans. Leaving her basket on the table she hurried back.

"Lord love yer for a clumsy fool," she cried out angrily, thoroughly frightened. "What be up to now?"

Reuben gave no answer, but lay half insensible and groaning heavily, unable to speak clearly, and blood flowing from his mouth, and in his eyes a dim mist rising which made him look strange and wild. Seeing him thus, with a cry of fear his wife knelt down beside him. "What be it?" she asked; then seeing the blood flow from his lips, she started up, screaming in mad terror.

Fortunately Jim Howels happened to be passing by with a team of cart-horses at that moment and heard her cries of agony.

"What be the matter?" he called out from the other side of the hedge. "Thee sounds, missus," he added jocularly, "as if t'old fiend had got thee by the leg." Then seeing her husband's grey ashy face, he leapt from the sorrel mare, crying out, "God Almighty! what have a-happened to Reuben?" Jim inspected his old friend closely, and then said aloud: "Reuben, he puts me to mind of Job Markins, as fell a twelvemonth ago last August from Farmer Eccles' rick. When they got to him there was nothin' to be done or said, for 'twas the hand of God! Now, missus,"

CHRIST'S TREE

he added phlegmatically, but not unkindly, "What be I to do for yer?"

"Man alive!" cried Joan, sobbing violently, "help me up with the maister and let's lie 'un into his bed. Have 'e nothing to say, man," she continued, looking at Reuben. "O Lord! O Lord! 'tis enough to make a woman wish as she war dead." Then the two pulled the dying man as best they could up the rickety cottage stairs, and laid him on the bed.

"Put somethin' round him if it's naught but the homespun (sheets); 'tis better than naught," said Jim. "Men is chilly same as babes when they're bad." So they put a shawl and one of her son's patchwork quilts about Reuben's shoulders.

"And now," said Mistress Hamnett, "for the love of Heaven run sharp and fetch the doctor, and let the lads know what has happened, and don't be long, for, oh! I be lonely—lonely!"

Then kind-hearted Jim looked sorrowfully at his old friend, murmured something about poor Reuben, and wiping his eyes against his sleeve went out snuffling.

When left alone Joan knelt down, bathed her husband's face and hands, and tried to revive him by all the simple ways she was mistress of. She endeavoured to pour down his black lips some drops of brandy from her cupboard, but Reuben's

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

head fell back and she could not make him swallow any.

"O Lord! O Lord!" she groaned, "to think as I should live, and for him not to be able to speak. He that allus was so gay and bosome, and rampageous even at times—same as a bullock let loose in clover—and now, poor soul! Well, it was all along of that robin. Why did Aaron up with his stone? Hunt, chevy, what yer may, but leave the squire's and the Lord's alone. One means jail and the other——" and here her eyes rested intently on the pale visage of her husband, and she did not dare finish her sentence, for she understood that a great desolation might be near her, and she fell a-weeping passionately, calling Reuben by tender names, and entreating him to speak if it were but one word. "Only one word, lad"; but Reuben lay cold and still giving no sign of life.

An hour later the doctor entered the cottage. He looked doubtfully at Reuben. "Bring a light," he said, for the daylight outside was waning and the bedroom had but one small window. Joan complied, and brought a tallow dip. Then the doctor laid his hand on Reuben's heart and shook his head. "It's all over; I can do nothing," he said shortly, but not unkindly.

Then Joan, not wishing to understand, cried out in spite of her fears, "There must be summat. Rich people would buy summat; sure there's some cure."

CHRIST'S TREE

But the doctor only shook his head, and calling to the sons who had just entered, bade them in a whisper mind their mother, and left hurriedly.

All through the wretched night Joan sat by her dead husband's side, whilst David remained on a stool on the other side. Sometimes they prayed, for they were pious folk, but often they sat in silence, just holding each a hand of the dead man, or they cried aloud for long spells.

When it was all dark they suddenly heard a noise outside the cottage.

"What be that?" asked Joan.

Then David leant out of the little window and recognised Aaron by his walk, who was dragging the axe and billhook listlessly behind him to the tool-shed, and replied, "Mother, 'tis nought but Aaron puttin' back the tools."

At this Joan's tears burst forth afresh. "To think," she cried, "as my man will never come back, or use they tools again. 'Tis six and twenty year agone since we war married, and he only yesterday as hearty as a colt in June and as merry as a throstle in spring. Big and kind, that's what he war."

At this David wept also, for he had loved his father, and though Reuben had not always concealed that he thought David a bit of a failure, he had always treated him with kindness and indulgence. Book-learning, it was true, he had held

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

was like restiveness in colts, or youthful complaints, but he had always been good-natured in his disapprobation, and believed that with his wisdom-teeth Davie would put away such useless toys as books and writing-paper.

When the day broke the dame returned to her ordinary duties; in her own words, "Same as usual, but the elderberry wine was never made. A body," she told her sons, "can do her duty, but in sorrow the kickshaws and pleasures be beyond her."

After the first meal, when Aaron had returned to the woods, because, as he had only his wages, the weekly earnings must none of them be lost, the widow called her youngest son to her. "Davie," she said, "we must bury 'un."

"So us will, mother; but the berrial 'twon't be till come Thursday or Friday. Aaron he have arranged all with the parson, and about the coffin he have spoke to—"

"Not *he's* as be upstairs, I don't mean," replied Joan, "but what's lyin' outside. Perhaps," she added in a mysterious whisper, "if we bury 'un with a prayer the Lord will wipe out the score."

Then David understood, and in the bright sunshine they went out together, and David took up the little dead bird and laid it gently between two dock-leaves, and followed his mother to the patch of kitchen-garden at the back.

"A Bible," cried Joan; "us must do it in a

CHRIST'S TREE

holy way, so that the stain be washed away. I cannot read," she said, "but I will bury if thou wilt read."

A moment later David returned with a Bible, and a trowel which he gave to his mother.

"Where shall I read?" he inquired.

"Where thee opens, for then what thee sees is the Lord's sure message."

So David opened at the ninth chapter of Deuteronomy and read from the twentieth verse: "And the Lord was very angry with Aaron to have destroyed him."

But his mother would hear no more. With a sharp scream she cried out, "Thou wilt undo thy brother!" and snatched the book quickly from David's hands. Then they buried the little bird in silence.

Two days later the funeral of Reuben Hamnett took place. The villagers in large numbers assembled, for many were sorry for his widow, and all had loved "honest Reuben," as they called him.

Joan followed the bier with her sons, and mother and sons bore in their hands sprays of rosemary and a bunch or two of autumn roses. The old parson at Much Wenlock performed the service, and at the close they laid their dear one reverently in the still churchyard, amongst the yews and just outside the great abbey ruins and cloisters.

After the service, as is still customary, a meal

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

followed for the mourners at the dead man's cottage.

All the day before Joan, with the aid of her neighbours, had been busy making pies and cakes for the feast. "I'll do the best for him as long as I'm spared," she had said. "I've a-given him the best of coffins, and it shall be a ham berrial."

To effect this object a ham had been purchased from Mistress Ffilley, of Newtown Farm, who was famed in the neighbourhood for her hams and flitches of bacon.

"Hers be the best in the countryside, and Farmer Ffilley he does them himself," Joan had said. "He spares nothin', saltpetre, sugar, and the best of salt. They be fit for Squire Weld's table. Bache's hams in the High Street be only fit for weddin's. Now us all knows 'tis a different quality altogether as is needed for berrials. For marriages any wench's curing does so long as the meat bain't rancid. For the young folks, when the heart is light, takes their vittles like pigs that have returned from market, straightforward and senseless, but when bodies eat in sorrow the food must be good and the quality kind, like James Rhoden's flour at Ludlow."

To this solemn feast Jim Howels and his wife, old Bill Trow and his sister, and Joan's niece, Idonea, and Reuben's brother, Thomas, who was a waggoner at Callaughton, were all bidden.

WENLOCK CHURCH.

Photo by Fritk.



卷之三

CHRIST'S TREE

The invited guests walked back over the sheep-nipt hill to the quiet cottage. They were patient, kindly folk, and sat down in the kitchen, whilst Aaron and David waited upon them. The meal began in silence, but after a while the beer began to loosen their tongues.

"I tell 'e," cried old Bill Trow, with a red face, addressing Aaron, "that I wouldn't stand that there tree nor the ladder neither. I'd have 'em both in the fire sure as my name's Wilgum. They have been the ruin of a fine, strong man, and thee should down with the tree, break up the ladder, and have as fine a blaze as the boys do gunpowder night. When man, beast, or tree does damage, 'tis time as they should perish."

"I says the same," cried Thomas Hamnett. "That there tree must have the devil in 'un, and when aught gets old Satan inside 'un, it's best to turn straight away, and so save the Judgment Day."

After this there followed a chorus of voices, all suggesting different things.

"If I was thee, Davie," said Idonea, "I'd leave the tree save for a sprinkling of water from the fount to begin with, after a christening, and a cup of natural rain come next Holy Thursday. If the tree have the devil, that will cure him sure as Joe Slags killed the bull, and if it warn't no wrong of the tree, it won't be any the worse,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

and will berry well next fall, and the judgment anyway will come from the Lord."

"Cut 'em down," interposed Thomas Hamnett. "A tree as has been the means of death should die, and I'd hew up the ladder too."

"But it is the Lord's tree—Christ's own," broke from David quickly. "It was of such as he as they cut the true cross."

"Fiddle-faddle! That's muck I wudn't tread in my mixen-yard," roared old Billy Trow, for the beer was mounting to his brain. "Cut 'em down, say I, root and branch and step, and make of all a furious fire, for they be all abominations. If I war yer," he said to the two brothers, "I'd have 'em down afore the morning, afore any could reproach me with 'em biding up."

After this all the guests ate heartily, and drank still more, as was, and perhaps is still, the way at such festivals, and at the end of the feast all got up a little unsteady in their walk, and in a state of great mental complacency generally.

When all had gone Joan came downstairs from her bedroom. She appeared red-eyed and dishevelled, for in the loneliness of her chamber she had been weeping bitterly. David, as she entered the kitchen, ran up to her.

"Thee must eat summat," he said affectionately, and as he spoke he put a log on the fire and pushed his mother's chair near the hearth. Then

CHRIST'S TREE

he made her sit down, and brought her some fragments from the past meal, and waited on her tenderly.

"Thee be a good lad," she said softening ; "milk-white and delicate, same as Dobson's cow ; but where be Aaron ?"

"I cannot say," he replied ; "gone out, dear heart, like enough," and he stood by gently coaxing her to eat something, and ended by bringing her a little beer in a cup.

"How did it go, lad ?" she asked anxiously. "Was the 'am first-class, and was the cakes right? Meg Jones promised as all should be fair Christian and in order. I should never forgive meself if so be as them as came warn't satisfied, or if they war to say as Simons over at Harley had 'abeen better berried. Idoné, though she be my own stock, she would notice and speak of anything as was as shudn't be. 'Tis her natur', same as Parson Malcomb's dog, to find faults and fleas onywar. Why, at Day of Judgment she'd notice a feather in the archangel's wing if it didn't hang proper, even if Michael war blowing the last trump. Her wudn't miss a fault however great the glory. There's some as has eyes for light, and some for specs, and Idoné allus had eyes for dirt and darkness. She war born so."

But here David interrupted her, and told her all the incidents of the repast. "They was all

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

able to eat the ham twice, mother," he said, "and some had it three times, as comfortable as Ned Holgate's white lamb in pasture. And as to the cakes, they cudn't finish 'em, try it as they wud. So know that they did thee full justice."

At this the widow looked up and smiled through her tears. "I think he knows, does Reuben," she said softly, "that I worked night and day for his berrial, same as Job Obditch in his shop, so that there should be no disgrace. It war my last duty, and I done it."

"Now mother," said David at last, after she had eaten well, "get thee to thy bed. Thou must be fair wearied out," and as he spoke he took her by the hand and skilfully helped her to undress.

"Thee should have been a wench. Well, lad, there be all sorts," and she kissed him gratefully and so they parted.

A few minutes later David went downstairs and opened the cottage door. All seemed very still and peaceful. A brilliant frosty moon shone overhead, and a thick white rime lay on the adjoining meadows. Out far away in the distance he heard the sound of a man trotting quickly along the stony road in the valley. Suddenly there was a pause, and then again the sound of horse's feet got nearer and nearer, but it was no longer the measured rhythm of trotting, for the

CHRIST'S TREE

horse was now mounting the hill at a furious rate. David stood listening, spellbound, in the garden. "Who could it be?" he asked himself, that rode so furiously through the night. An instant later and Aaron leapt from the horse, which stood panting, while its flanks smoked, in the moonlight. David recognised his brother, and Aaron reeled up the steps that led from the road to the garden.

"What be the matter? and whose horse hast thou got, Aaron?" inquired David breathlessly.

"Never thee mind. 'Tis naught to thee what I does, thou whelp. Go and take the nag to the shed, and keep a quiet tongue in thy head or it shall be the worse for thee, thou milk-faced, canary-livered nincompoop. Thee hasn't dad at thy back now," and Aaron broke out into a volley of sullen oaths.

In silence David led the panting steed to an outhouse, where his father had formerly kept a cow, and tied him up. After shaking down a little litter, and giving him an armful of hay, David returned to the garden. He found his brother sitting on a rough bench before the house, and drinking great draughts of heady beer from a black mug. As he sat thus engaged, he broke the silence of the night by singing disjointed lines from some chapman's drinking chorus.

"Thee had best come in," said David, turning white with shame. "Them at Newtown will hear

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

thee, and speak evil of us for drinking and making merry to-night."

"Hold thy pious tongue, and shunt thy daisy face. Dost think thee can lord it over me. I'll teach thee to know thy maister. I'll make it cold for thee as old Bolas, if thou darest to gainsay me, thou canting, mealy-mouthed, spaniel knave. I'm the big man here," and Aaron leant up lazily against the bench. "I'd have thee to know *that*; them as don't knuckle under and suit me must flit—same as Mother Gormal's geese."

At this David turned away and was about to retrace his steps to the house when Aaron called after him. "Go fetch the axe and the bill-hook, they be in the shed. Bill Trow is right. By gum, we'll have the elder-tree down."

Then as David hesitated to obey, he broke out again into a mist of foul curses, and swore that if he had a mind he would have the elder-tree down, "Sure as his name was Aaron Hamnett."

At this David returned, and standing by him entreated him eagerly not to do anything so rash or so headstrong as to cut down the tree.

"Remember the robin," he pleaded, "and what it brought us. The elder be Christ's own tree. He, who destroys it, brings down a curse upon his head. For mother's sake, forbear."

For all reply Aaron heaped upon his brother's head foul epithets, and starting up lurched up

CHRIST'S TREE

the pebbled pathway to fetch the tools himself. When he reappeared, David was standing by the elder-tree. A strange light lit up the boy's face. His expression was full of fortitude, and quiet dignity. "Above all things," he reasoned, "I must avert a second misfortune. The death of the robin was the cause of my father's death; at all risks I will prevent a second calamity from happening."

"Tak' this and work," cried Aaron fiercely, handing David a billhook. "Thee can lop the branches while I can hack at the tree."

"I will not," said David passionately, with a white face but a determined voice. "Us cannot fight two curses."

For all answer Aaron swung his axe high above his head and brought it down upon the elder-trunk, causing a flight of chips to fall at his feet. Then, as David did not move, he shouted out: "Stand aside, or I'll do for thee too, thou white-livered white-feathered, craven cock. I'll be the death of thee," and he lifted his axe again. This time it fell with a fearful thud, but not on the trunk of the elder-tree, but on the back and neck of his brother.

David had dashed forward and encircled the tree with his arms, hoping by doing so to protect it from his brother's wrath. With a savage yell Aaron leapt over the wall into the road and fled.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

In the morning the villagers found David cold and stiff, a smile upon his lips, but with a ghastly gash across his neck and shoulders.

"'Tis the Lord's doing," cried Joan, panic-struck ; "the God of Heaven protects His own. The robin and Christ's tree have been the undoing of us."

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

Down amongst the woods of Sherlot there lived in the first half of the eighteenth century an old keeper and his wife. They lived on the outskirts of the once mighty forest. A little meadow where the daffodils blossomed in April lay before the cottage door, whilst many a spotted setter and cocker spaniel were born and bred in the kennels behind. Cocks and hens ran over the turf, and coops stood about in summer while pheasants called beyond. It was a lonely place, but full of charm. The colouring of the woods was exquisitely beautiful in spring when the beeches unfolded their tender green leaves, and later on when the rowan-groves flamed red as fire with scarlet berries. Stephen Cressage had married pretty Nelly Hill, one of the still-room maids of the Hall. They had one daughter, little Patty. She was the gayest of little maidens; she could repeat with pert drollery a rhyme or story, or better still, sing by ear almost any song that she had heard.

“Little ‘un has music in her throat, missus.”

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

her proud father would say, “same as larks or thrushes.”

When Patty was able to walk so far, she was often taken by her mother to see Mistress Crowther, the stately housekeeper of the hall. This good dame rustled about in a black silk sacque and hoop, and wore an irreproachable white lawn fichu, and was much more awe-inspiring a personage in village estimation than gentle Madam Weld herself.

Patty, when she was old enough, would bring from her mother a basket of fresh eggs, and then sing for the amusement of the grave old butler and Mistress Crowther.

One day beautiful Madam Weld, and little Mistress Elizabeth heard her sing. “What a dear little girl!” exclaimed the lady of the Hall, “and what a pretty voice!” The two children were about the same age, but very different in appearance, for Elizabeth was as fair as a lily, and Patty a brilliant brunette.

Madam Weld took her little guest up to her own boudoir, and accompanied her daughter’s singing on the harpsichord. “Gather ye roses while ye may,” sang pretty little Mistress Elizabeth, whilst Madam Weld, or her Ladyship, as she was better known in the village, played the music softly with her delicate jewelled hands.

Patty looked on and listened, full of admiration.

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

"When I am grown up I will sing like Mistress Elizabeth," said Patty later on to her mother.

"That thee will, lovey," replied her mother, and from that day Mrs. Cressage's pride in her daughter increased.

"Us must make a lady of Patty," her mother would say to her husband when he sat of an evening smoking his pipe, and Patty, on hearing this, would flush with pleasure, and give herself little wayward airs. In order to effect this object, Patty's hands were to be kept white and unsoiled. "Don't thee tire theeself over the wash-tub," she would say ; or, "thee needn't scrub ; any cottage slut can do that," and as Patty grew older many of her father's savings were spent in procuring her lessons on the violin from Master Joshua Bowdler, the Much Wenlock schoolmaster. By this means Patty was enabled to accompany her singing.

Stephen grumbled at first, but after a time was pleased and became proud of the lass that he was told was born to rise so high. It is true that his brother Thomas and his wife Selina looked askance at Patty's accomplishments, and said disagreeable, unsympathetic things about pride having a fall, but then sympathy is not a virtue often found amongst relations, and life can well be supported without it, provided always that fate has not forced us to live as fellow lodgers with those near of kin.

As time went on Patty learnt many little songs

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

about broken hearts and darts ; about Chloe and her lover ; or sang in the farm-houses round songs of the country-side, such as "The Cruel Mother," "The Golden Glove," "Lord Thomas," "The Disdainful Lady," and many others. She became a welcome guest at harvest-homes or at Christmas-tide.

One day she was invited by Madam Weld. "We are giving a ball to all our tenants," the great lady explained, "and between the minuet and a country dance your daughter, Mrs. Cressage, shall bring her violin and sing to us. Mistress James of Posenhall, and Mistress Lawley of the Marsh Farm tell me excellent things of her voice. She sang to them at their love-spinning last June, I heard. All our tenants will be there ; Master Bowdler and some of the burgesses of Much Wenlock ; and if Patty has no gay smock and petticoat, my daughter will lend her all that is needful."

Patty's heart throbbed with joy, and her eyes sparkled with delight as she curtsied low to Madame Weld.

"Thee wilt be as proud as one of madam's peacocks. I shall not know thee in such fine clothes. Why, thou wilt look a born lady in Mistress Elizabeth's sacque and hoop," said her mother later.

All the afternoon before the ball Mrs. Cressage



Photo by Valentine.

WENLOCK GUILDHALL.





THE WHITE PURIFICATION

fondly curled her daughter's long dark locks. She arranged them in a cascade of curls which almost reached her waist, and crowned her brows with a wreath of scarlet rowanberries. In the dusk mother and daughter walked to Willey Park.

"Will they all ask me to dance?" inquired Patty joyfully. "There's Robin Hill as is sure to ask me to trip a jig; and there's Phil Shingler and Dicky Morland that I know by sight—at least they always offer me a hymn-book in church."

"Thee must be quiet like the Quality," urged the mother nervously.

"Never fear, mother; I'll watch Mistress Elizabeth and note all that she does, and I'll get Master Bowdler to lend me his fiddle; 'tis a better one than mine."

When they reached the Hall, Mrs. Cressage and her daughter were shown up into a little bedroom. A few minutes later, the door was opened and pretty, gracious Mistress Elizabeth entered.

"See, Patty," she said, "what Belinda, my waiting-woman, has brought you—my silver stomacher, and my white satin petticoat and black lace. You will look, child, like a vision of night. 'Queen of Night,' I suspect the beaux will call you."

Patty stammered with joy and excitement, and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

could hardly find words to thank her young mistress with.

Mrs. Cressage beamed and said, "My daughter can never thank your ladyship enough."

Every one seemed pleased but Belinda, who tossed her head and declared shortly afterwards in the servants' hall "that she didn't know what was coming next, if beggars and such like were to be treated like duchesses. We shall have the dogs from the kennels on madam's best brocaded sofa next, or the moor-fowl from the pond put in madam's orangery. Pretty doings, forsooth!"

When Patty was dressed by her admiring mother she was led downstairs to the great "oak saloon," as it was called. Tapestry hung from the walls, whilst the lights from a hundred candles shone down upon the guests. "Fear nothing," said Mistress Elizabeth, "they are all friends."

Patty felt dazzled at first. She had never seen so many tapers lighted before, and besides the farmers and their wives there were present many noble and notable personages. The sheriff of the county, Sir William Williams, and his lady from Wales; Mr. Clive of Styche, the Squire of Morville and his lady, and Sir Robert Lawley and his pretty daughter, besides many others. It seemed to Patty as if she had entered fairyland. She could never have imagined anything so beautiful. "And this is what ladies do?" she said

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

sorrowfully, as she recalled to mind her own humble home, and thought of her mother washing at the tub, or her father mixing the meal and bones for his dogs.

Then the musicians struck up a slow and stately measure.

Two dancers stepped forward, Master Brooke Forester and Mistress Elizabeth. "See, they are to dance a minuet together," some one whispered.

How gracefully she curtsied! How admiringly he gazed! All looked attentively, and a tender smile wreathed Madam Weld's face.

Sir William Williams approached his hostess and whispered something to her. She smiled back, and Squire Weld nodded approval.

The little secret was guessed.

"I'm roight glad," said Farmer Davies, "as our young lady has chosen young Forester. He seems a roight proper man. He will have a fine fortune and the prettiest lass of the country-side."

When the music ceased Patty still felt as if in a dream. "Why could it not go on always—always? How beautiful life then would be!"

She was recalled to what was passing around her by the harsh discordant voice of her uncle Thomas, who was handing round glasses of punch to some of the farmers.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"Come, maid," he said, "what is thee doing there? I warrant me thee can roar like a bittern when thee lifts up thee voice. See, yonder is Madam Weld a-beckoning to thee. Up with thy duds and do her bidding."

Patty crimsoned with vexation, and walked across the room to where Madam Weld was standing; that lady was talking to Sir William Williams.

"You do not know our Sherlot nightingale," she was saying. "She can sing like a bird, and to-night she is going to sing for us, to amuse and delight all these good people," pointing to the tenants and their wives. "Elizabeth has lent the child a sacque so that our song-bird may be in gay plumage."

Sir William bowed, indulged in a pinch of snuff, and vowed "that whatever Madam Weld ordered would always be a delight and a pleasure to all."

Then at a sign from the mistress of the house Patty tucked the fiddle tightly under her chin and broke forth into song. She sang first of all in the taste of the day, a little song about a nymph and a satyr, full of classical allusions, in a clear, though somewhat tremulous voice.

"Very pretty, my girl," said the squire good-naturedly; "but now let all these good people hear you sing a right good ballad of the country-side."

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

Whereupon Patty struck up with a wail of melody from her violin the well-known and touching air of "Cruel Barbara Allen."

"Well sung, little one," said the squire in his kind hearty voice, "but 'tis laughter and good-fellowship that we want to-night and no dirges. Something jolly, little mistress, for to-night is a gay night"; and he looked at his wife tenderly.

Then Patty tuned her fiddle and broke forth in the rousing, rollicking air of the "Three Jolly Huntsmen." As Patty ceased singing all the company clapped their hands, and some of the old tenants beat loudly with their sticks—one or two of the farmers' daughters tossed their heads, it is true, and Phœbe Marsland said "*she* didn't hold with cottage wenches being brought forward like that when their betters stood unnoticed." But the young men buzzed round Patty like flies round a jar of honey.

"Is the world going well with you, chit?" murmured Mistress Elizabeth graciously as she passed the keeper's daughter.

Patty could not speak for excitement and pleasure. She only laughed and nodded. The joy of life seemed just then to overwhelm her senses as she slid her hand into the arm of her partner, and took her place for the country dance. Gaily she and her partner danced.

"You don't know me, perhaps," he said in a

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

pause. "I'm Richard Strong and I come from Rundleford Hall, the other side of Bridgnorth. I like to go out with the hounds, and can tally-ho! with the best of them; but though I like fox-hunting, I can pay my court to a pair of dark eyes, and can worship at the shrine of beauty." As he spoke, Richard gazed at her boldly.

Patty was greatly impressed. How different was his assurance to the shy, uncouth manners and ways of Bill More, the ploughman, of Jocelyn Humphreys, or even of honest Robin Hill, who, one and all, would have looked at her shyly and have hardly dared to open their lips beyond saying "it was a foine day," or, "that grain was loikely," and then have turned sheepishly away.

The evening wore on, and Patty found herself constantly the partner of Strong.

Richard was a tall young man, with a florid complexion. His conversation was well flavoured with oaths, his coat was of silk, and he assured Patty that he knew every one present. He talked familiarly of the guests, and intimated that he could ride a match with any of the young sprigs on his horse, the Wrekin; and had a cock or two that could beat Sir Robert Lawley's any day. "Don't care what I spend on my pleasures," he added loftily, "but it has always been my rule, child, to have the best."

Patty's foolish little heart was lost in admiration.

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

"Here was a real gentleman," she told herself. Before they bid adieu to each other Richard had discovered where Patty lived, and all about her, and had obtained from her a promise, that she would meet him in the forest on the following day. In the early dawn, Patty, and her mother wended their way back to their lonely cottage in the forest.

"Lord, he did look sweet on thee," exclaimed the proud mother, "and he's a perfect gentleman ; there's no denying same as hunts with the fox-hounds ; and has his own trap and sharp mare. Besides, he lives at Rundleford Hall, and has taken the squire's big farm over Broseley way after Easter. I asked Master Bowdler, and Larry Dauner all about 'un. O my pretty, I be fond, and pleased with thee."

The following day Patty went out and met her lover.

"Thee arn't ashamed of me, Richard ?" she asked him a week later, looking back at the cottage as she spoke, and thinking the while of her parent's humble position.

"I've been to London, not lived all my life like a yokel," he answered, "and know how to treat a lovely lass," and then he laughed.

Mrs. Cressage was delighted at the turn things were taking, and beamed with smiles when Richard visited her cottage. Once, it is true,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Stephen had asked rather anxiously, " Think you, missus, he means fair by the lass ? " to which Mrs. Cressage had replied indignantly, " Have done with you. Would you spoil sport, and ruin your only child's fortunes ? Keep in the background. A fine gentleman like he doesn't want to crack with old gossips like us. Us shan't tread her carpets at Rundleford, but us shall see her pass in her coach as fine as any city madam, with a cushioned head, and wearing jewels that even Madam Weld might envy."

Once Thomas Cressage called and made the keeper and his wife feel uneasy. " Thee lets thy wench be too free," he snapped, "'tis a bad name as Richard Strong has. They tells me at the Horse and Shoes that he courted poor Rose Bridgewater, just as he's courting thy maid, a year agone, and now she's dying, with her aunt at Pulverbatch, of a broken heart. Richard Strong's promises be as fair as May blossoms ; but 'tis little fruit, I'm thinking, thy wench will get out of them. Take my word for it, you're all here as foolish as suckin' gullies."

That evening, when Patty returned, her father said to her, " Thee had best, my maid, not be too much with Squire Strong, unless he has asked thee to be his wife. There's some as talks fine, but means little."

Upon which Patty had dropped her head and

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

burst into a flood of angry tears, and declared "it was cruel so to insult her," and that her Richard had promised to be as "true as steel" to her. "Those were his very words," she repeated with a crimson face.

Then Mrs. Cressage again took the lovers' part, and told her husband to mind his dogs and leave gentlefolk alone; and Patty, the following day and many after, went out in the wood and spent it in Richard's company. Summer passed, and autumn grew damp and chill, and then winter came with heavy snow.

For some time Patty had lost her elasticity and brightness. Her cheeks were no longer so bright, her hands seemed thinner and her step was slower.

"What ails thee, child?" asked her father anxiously one day. "Thee's not half the bouncing lass thee war, and thy sweetheart has not been over for best part of a month to pay thee court; thee looks sad and nesh."

"'Tis the cold," murmured the girl.

"Thee never sings nor plays now. Courtin' seems a heavy job, newfashionedwise. When I was young it made us blithe and light-hearted, I know."

That evening, when Patty went to her little chamber, her mother's heart was filled with vague anxiety. Twice during the bitter afternoon Patty

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

had seemed on the point of telling her something, and the mother had noticed that her daughter's eyes had filled with tears, when her father had spoken about the grand wedding that was to take place at the Hall in the spring.

Poor Mrs. Cressage, fearing that all was not well, crept up the rickety staircase and peeped into her daughter's bedroom. Patty was lying down on the bed, her head buried in the pillows, and was weeping as if her heart would break.

"My lady-bird, what is it?"

A short whispered explanation and the mother covered her face with her hands and wept also.

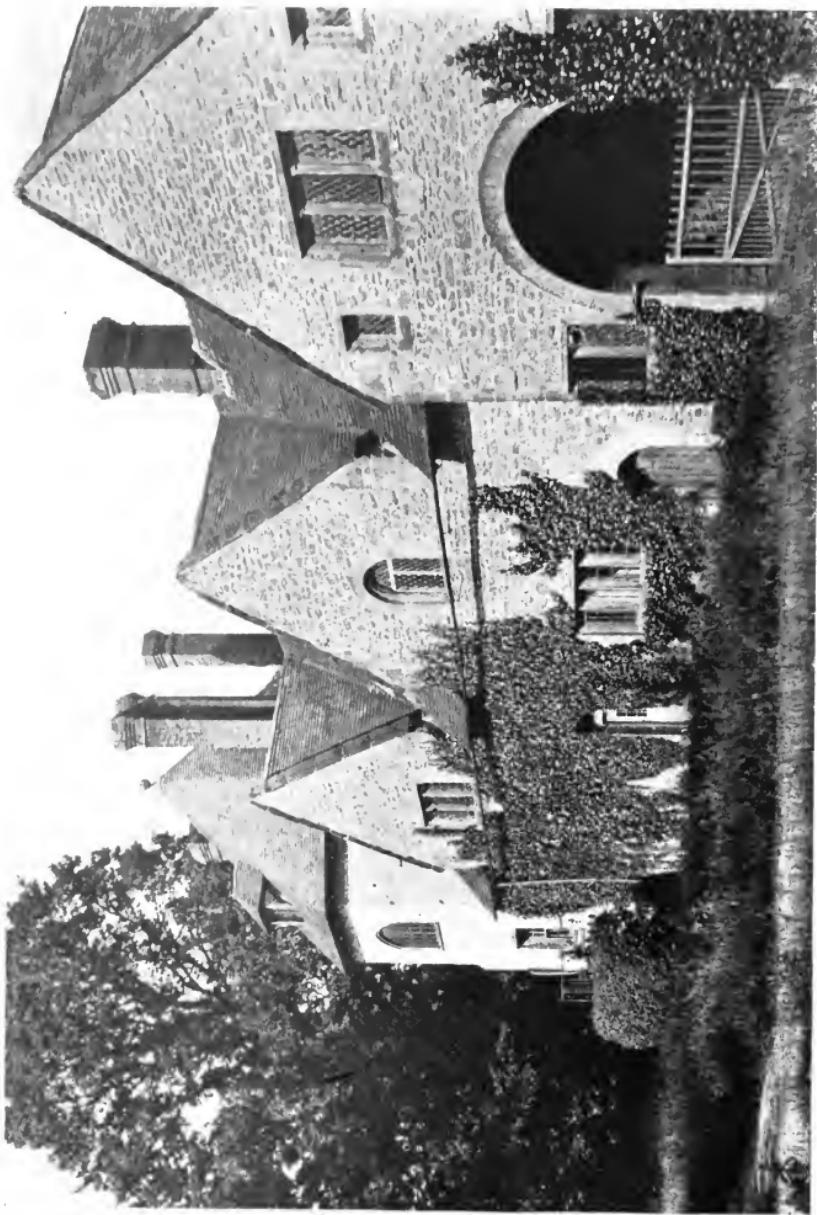
"How can I tell thy father?" she said as she left the room.

All the next day the poor woman tried to find an opportunity to tell her husband the sad secret, but her words died on her lips each time she endeavoured to speak.

About two o'clock in the afternoon Stephen suddenly rose from his chair and said, "What's that? Sure 'tis the sound of a horse's feet," and then they saw through the little lattice pane Madam Weld on her white pony led by the squire on foot.

"What can it be, Stephen, that his Honour wants?" cried Nelly.

"I'll go and see," and Stephen went out and



OLD WILLEY HALL.

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

held the horse, whilst Madam Weld entered the cottage.

Mrs. Cressage nervously dusted her best chair to receive her guest, but Madam Weld waved her gently aside and remained standing. "I am much grieved to hear all this about Patty," she said. "She must not come to the Hall," and Madam Weld blushed like a girl as she spoke.

Patty overhead in her bedroom heard what Madam Weld was saying, and turned cold with a numbing sense of intense misery. Were all the beautiful things of life for ever past? What an awful thing this was.

Then Madam Weld went on to say that "Patty has done wrong. She has been wild and foolish, and it is the old sad story. Get her away, for evil tongues are talking, and it will be better so for the poor child," and as she spoke she slipped a purse into Mrs. Cressage's hand. "You cannot think," she added, "how much I have regretted that it was at my husband's house that the poor child met her betrayer."

Then Mrs. Cressage curtsied in silence, and something broke within her at the thought that all the world would know that her idol was broken, and that her daughter could never more hold up her head again as before.

Still the wretched mother did not dare tell her husband, the words would not come. Many

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

times she took Patty in her arms and kissed her.

That evening Stephen returned home somewhat late. As he placed the horn lantern on the mantelpiece, his wife saw that his face was changed. Without a word he sat down, and abruptly asked for Patty.

"She's not well," stammered the mother trembling.

But Stephen took no notice, and called out in a strange, terrible voice, "Come down ; come down, I say."

Down the stairs came Patty in her nightgown, shivering with fear, and with bare feet.

Then her father spoke in a voice that sounded unlike his own, so hollow and ghostly did it sound. "Thee hast ruined me, wench," he said. "May God's curse rest with thy father's. To-morrow thou shalt go to the Maybrook Farm and work under Elsie Davies, who is my cousin and Madam Fletcher's head dairymaid. Thou shalt help her to milk her seven-and-twenty cows, and sweat as others do. Thou and thy lover thought thyselfes as cunning as 'crowders' (fiddlers), but thou at least shall have to reckon with me. Thou hast disgraced us—thou hast disgraced us," and the old man fell into a terrible fit of moaning, swaying backwards and forwards before the fire in his chair.

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

The following day Patty was taken by her mother to her cousin's cottage at Brocton.

"She can share with me," Elsie said, "but I can't do here with any city madams. We rise at five, and her must eat what I does. Farmer Fletcher don't find us in kickshaws."

Some months later Patty gave birth to a son. He grew up a fair little boy, thin and delicate.

"Lad's most like an All Souls chicken. He'll never do much for thee, lass," Elsie used to say with a shrug of her massive shoulders.

Patty's father never went to see her. "The wench has disgraced me," he would say moodily, and then not speak for hours. But Mrs. Cressage, in the long summer evenings, would walk over to Brocton and take her daughter a chicken, a pot of honey, or later on a basket of rosy apples. The two women never mentioned Squire Strong, as they called him. News of him reached Patty at intervals: of how once he beat a main of cocks at Ludlow, and then she heard of him in some drunken row at Shrewsbury, and once Patty heard a rumour that he meant to marry Squire Mytton's daughter at Shipton Hall.

Years passed on, Patty's boy grew up, and she continued to work on the farm. She worked in the fields, milked the cows, and helped to make the cheese. In a few years Patty had lost her looks; she was always shabbily dressed and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

had grown fat and somewhat coarse-looking. Her little boy ran about after her, scared birds, fished in the summer evenings in the pond on the road to Easthope, and learnt old saws and songs.

In the meantime, as the years rolled on, Richard became a much poorer, if not a wiser or a better man. As long as he had money he gambled with cards and dice at the Blue Boar or Jumping Squirrel, and betted heavily on cocks and prize-fighters. Later, when the cash began to fail, he began to drink often and late. Suddenly he grew thin and began to cough ; then he lost heart and grew morose, and the thought of death haunted him. To meet his debts he was obliged to have a forced sale of his house and farm-stock. He then remembered that of his fortune little remained but a few cottages inherited from his mother, Lettice Langley.

He went to Brocton one day from Bridgnorth, and drove in a cart to an old woman, by name Meg Morris, who lived in a cottage below Larden Hall, that faces north. An evil-looking little dank cottage it was, surrounded with gnarled fruit-trees, underneath which gaunt pigs grunted and ran about. Richard begged to be admitted for a small payment.

“Thee may come in for thee mother’s sake. She were one of God’s angels, but thee ever took after thy father.”

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

Richard had brought in the cart a bed, the curtains of which had been worked by his mother, a table, and a few chairs. They were all that remained of his former splendour. He and the carter carried them up to the little draughty bedroom.

"Thou canst sleep here, Dick," said Meg; "I'll do in the kitchen. Thee looks but sadly; sit down, and I'll give thee a cup of bread and milk."

Richard sat down and partook of her homely fare. Suddenly the door was quickly opened, and a tiny little figure in a tattered smock appeared. "Who are you, boy?" inquired Richard.

"I am Hop O' Thumb," was the reply. "At least that's what folks call me here. I can dance a morris, sing a song, and hop, run, and jump with the best of them. There's nothing," he added grandly, "I don't know of these parts. I can show you Ippekin's Cave, where Smallman leapt down the Edge, and I know where the wild huntsmen ride. Art thou a gentleman?" he asked suddenly. "Cousin Elsie said there was one mummum used to know a-comin' here."

"But them as wud thrive,
Mun rise at five;
Them as ha' thriven,
May lie till seven.'

"That's what grandam says, but I'll never be

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

a gentleman. I'll live as Farmer John and follow the plough."

Then the little elfish thing sat down, laughed, and without notice, but in a fit of friendship, climbed up uninvited on Richard's knee.

The next day Richard met the little boy driving a cow down a lane. As he walked he sang :

"I hop across the garden,
I caper o'er the lea,
I sing with ev'ry dicky,
And hum with ev'ry bee."

"Hullo ! master," he said, "where art going ? "

Strange to say, Richard felt at once attracted by the child. He was very lonely, and this little scrap of human life seemed to hold his affections almost at once.

"I'll come with you, lad," he answered.

They walked together by the pool that skirts the road on the way to Lutwyche. Then they fell a-talking like old friends. What possessed Richard he did not know, but he abruptly caught up the little boy and kissed him passionately.

"I wish I had a son like thee," he said. The little lad was frightened and struggled to get away.

With a bang the gate of an adjoining field was opened and a woman in a tattered headgear and ragged skirt entered the lane. She ran up to

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

the little lad and seized hold of his hand. Then, turning to Richard, she cried, "I would rather see him a corpse than take to thee."

Richard looked at her and recognised her. "It has been a bad business," he said to himself, and returned home.

After that the lad and he would meet furtively, but he found the child generally nervous and shy. "Mum will whop me if she finds me with you, sir," he would say.

Summer passed, and the damp of a chill November told upon Richard's impaired constitution. He coughed terribly at times, and daily grew thinner and thinner.

"He won't be for long," said his old nurse.

One day Richard heard a soft tap at the cottage window.

"Mum's away; gone off to market, so I've come," said little Hop O' Thumb. "See what I've brought you—a couple of damsons. They be still good, only a bit squashy," and the child brought forth from his breeches pocket the fruit.

"Wilt thou come sometimes and see me," said his father; "I am very lonely."

"That I will when I can dodge mum, but she's terrible with the strap."

After that Richard could go out but little. Each day he coughed more and grew feebler and feebler.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Christmas passed away and the young year began. Gradually red tints spread themselves over the poplars, and purple lights lay upon woods and hills, lamb-tails hung upon the hazels and wild arums and dog's mercury appeared beneath the hedges.

"I cannot get out," sighed Richard, and now he lay night and day coughing in his bed, very weak and helpless.

Old Widow Morris came up to his room one beautiful sunny day. It was an exquisite day, and carried with it the promise of spring. She opened the window which over-looked the little garden. As she did so the song of a thrush on an apple-tree reached him.

"Does thee want for anything?" inquired the old woman gently.

"I want nothing that money can buy, Meg; but oh! Meg, I should like to see my little boy and say good-bye before I die. I have done him and his mother a grievous wrong. God forgive me; I would repair it if I might."

"Thee shall see thy son," said the old woman.

A little later several footsteps were heard on the stairs, but the little boy entered the room alone.

"They say as you're ill, sir," he said; "but see what I've brought you—the first bunch of white snowdrops. Folks say as a knot of these will

THE WHITE PURIFICATION

purify a whole house," and the boy laid them beside his father's pillow.

"I pray God they may purify my heart," said Richard earnestly. "Little boy, I want you to ask your mother to come and forgive me."

"I durst not ask her," said the little boy trembling, "for she would beat me."

Then Richard thought he heard a sob outside. "Tell her, my boy," said Richard, "that I am dying, and I humbly ask her forgiveness."

"We have burnt the holly downstairs on the hearth," interrupted Hop O' Thumb, "for when 'you bring in the white flowers you burn the old things,' they say."

"Yes," said Richard dreamily, "with the new hope you cast away old sins and follies. I have written a letter to your mother ; take it to her, my lad, and tell her I am sorry—sorry—" He did not finish his sentence, but remained gazing tenderly at the little boy.

Then Hop O' Thumb took the letter. "I think," he said, "the white flowers have done you good."

Outside a woman knelt on the stairs weeping bitterly.

"I thought you said, mum, as you hated 'un," said the boy, as he put the letter down beside her.

"Love and hate are the same, child," was her answer.

When Richard fell asleep a little later, Patty

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

stole to his side and prayed there. Perhaps on both these erring hearts had fallen somewhat of what folks used to term the "white purification." Who knows? The blessed dew falls nightly on garden and wilderness alike, and heaven, we know, can open, for even those who are in deepest sorrow.

“THE WITCH’S COCK”

A LEGEND OF THE CLEE

BENEATH the Brown Clee, in the heart of loyal Shropshire, there stands a village known as Cleobury North. In a wild and lonely field there stood, in the eighteenth century, on the outskirts of this village, a little stone house. It was inhabited by a man named Simon Bache, his wife Esther, and their only son Harry.

Simon had worked hard, yet in his own words had “thriven little.” “There is some as has luck and some as hasn’t,” he would say sadly to himself. Somehow it always seemed to rain when he cut his little croft of grain that climbed up the steep flanks of the great hill; and, somehow, if poultry were killed by a fox they were sure to be Simon’s. Esther was a dark-eyed slender young woman that he had courted from Weston Bank, some miles away, of that strange Spanish type not unfrequently seen amidst the hills of Shropshire. She was probably of gipsy blood, as it is said many of the good folks of Homer are. Their

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

only son Harry was a dark-eyed delicate little lad with a straight outline of features and eyes and hair that recalled Murillo's pictures.

"The lad," the neighbours said, "was something of a charmer," and they looked upon him a little askance. He sang quaint rhymes, and heard, he declared, whispers in the trees, and would chant strange words to his geese as he drove them over the moor, or sat and watched the half-starved cow and heifer that constituted his father's herd.

Simon Bache was a carrier by trade. He drove a cart down to Ludlow several days in the week, called at the houses of the gentry, and carried parcels and boxes from Ludlow and the other small market-towns within a certain radius. He drove a meagre, black mare, that was known in the village as Black Sal.

It was nice enough to drive the cart in the pleasant summer months, when the hawthorn glistened white and snow-like on every hedge, or later on when the purple heather bloomed on the mountain side, and when the grouse would whirr away to the valleys; but it was an ill job when snow lay heavy on the ground, and when bitter piercing winds made it doubly hard for man and beast to move forward. Dour places are these mountain homes of England save for the summer months.

THE WITCH'S COCK

One day Simon in an early spring morning drove to Ludlow. It was a raw, chill day.

"I'll come back to-night, missus," he had said to his wife at the door, "but I'll be late, for there's fowls for Madam Jones, and eggs for her little missy, and there's nets to leave on Miles, his Honour's keeper, and a parcel of Bohea and oranges for her ladyship that lives in the Red Hall on the way back. Then there's a clutch of ducks' eggs from Madam Woolridge for her niece which I wasn't 'nohow' to forget. Aye, it will be a weary while afore I get back to thee and the boy."

"I'll watch for thee," replied his wife, "and Black Sal shall have to-night a fern bed and a good shake of hay. 'Tis a pity," she added, patting the old mare's neck, "as her is getting old, but even the witch, Maisie Boomer, canna give her fresh life, I'm thinkin'."

"Thee leave witches alone," said Simon. "I want no devil's knowledge here. Thee art a good lass, but over fond of fancies and whimsies, and 'the devil be always near,' parson says. Anyway, 'tis best not to lure him by call, or rhyme."

"Nay, nay," retorted his wife, somewhat nettled, "I only does what's proper."

Simon did not stop to hear more, but got into his cart, and lumbered away along the silent lanes.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

To quote Esther Bache's expression about herself, she only did what was considered proper and necessary in her village. That is to say, on All Souls Day she made soul-cakes and gave them to the boys when they crowded round her door, whilst her husband looked on gloomily, and grumbled at what he considered the waste of good flour.

"Soul! a soul for a soul-cake!" the children would call.

Then on Christmas Eve Esther would throw away her soap-suds or "black-lees," as she called them, while Harry would dance amongst the cobbles of the little garden-path, and jump up and down in his hob-nailed boots, singing all the while in his little clear treble voice :

"Come lads with a noise,
Come on merry boys,
The wash to the mould,
To gain luck for the fold,
While the good dame, she,
As merry as we,
Bids us all quaff
To our loves and be free."

It was a rough old rhyme, but it had a good swinging tune and Harry had heard it lustily sung by big Tom Brand, the blacksmith of Cleobury North. Each Christmas Eve he piped it forth as loudly as he could, and

THE WITCH'S COCK

gained for doing so a bowl of warm bread and milk.

At Candlemas Mrs. Bache would take the sprigs of holly that she had decked the dresser with and burn them reverently on the hearth, repeating softly while she held her little son's hand the while :

"These leaves once green, I swiftly bake,
Thy hand I hold for love's dear sake,
May flames thy heart make sweet and pure,
And may thy path with God endure."

Later on, when the first signs of spring dawned upon the earth, Esther would bid her son fetch from Mrs. Hartland's orchard a posy of snowdrops. "They are Christ's flowers," she would say, "and purify the house."

Some of her neighbours declared that they had no time for such idle kickshaws, but many of the village folk in the eighteenth century still kept up the custom of the "white purification," as it was then called.

It was amongst such customs that little Harry Bache was brought up, and of course the belief in witches and in their power was to him a very real one. In fact no one doubted the power of witch, or wizard, in those days any more than they contested the authority of the squire or parson.

In the hills the country world was still full of many vague beliefs that dated back to pagan times,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

and the Puritans as elsewhere had failed to cast out old thoughts, old fashions and dim imaginings that belonged really to former races.

The day passed gloomily enough, sheets of sleet and snow fell upon the Brown Clee, and wild winds whistled round the little homestead. Harry returned in the early afternoon driving home the geese.

"It isn't much longer that I'll drive the grey 'un," he said to his mother. "It's soon she'll want to sit, and the gander, old Noll, is that fierce that if I had not a stout stick he would have gone for me and got my legs."

"Didst meet any one?" asked his mother after a pause.

"Nay, mother, only the witch as she sped up the hill. I heard her talking to herself, but what she said I know not, for I trembled so, and her curses, Tom says, are as coals of fire."

"Aye, lad, aye, there's many a marriage as Maisie Boomer has blighted, and many a lass she's wed by charms."

"Does she never do any good?" asked little Harry innocently.

"Never, lad, that I have ever heard of. She is an enemy of God, parson seems to think, judging from his sermon last Sunday on witchcraft, and Will Forrest says 'she knows the devil's tongue.'"

"What's that?" inquired Harry.

THE WITCH'S COCK

"Never thee mind, it's naught that we wants here—and now, boy, give a hand and peel they potatoes, for it's peeled potatoes in fat and a bite of meat that the good man shall have to-night."

Harry did what he was bid, and sat with a knife and a bowl of potatoes before the glowing hearth.

"Thee hast heaped on the brash!" he murmured presently.

"It is to warm thy father," said his mother.

As Harry peeled his potatoes he sang :

"There's one who lives in the old ash tree,
Too-hoo! Too-hoo! Too-hee!
Her ways they are kind to you and me,
Too-hoo! Too-hoo! Too-hee!
The world it winds up a crooked street,
But death is a place where all must meet,
Too-hoo! Too-hoo! Too-hee!
Away, far away,
With me come and play
Down, down in the vale,
Where the aspens pale
All shiver and faint, and fade away."

"Why, Lord love you, child, who learnt you that?" asked Esther.

"The little lass of the hills, as Bill Sloman calls her—the witch's brat as Ned and Phil Hartland style her."

"I fear," said his mother, "it is no holy rhyme thee hast there. Thee had better repeat a psalm.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Good words are better for young lips like thine, lad. I fear me there is hidden sin in it, anyway it scents of a charm."

"Nay, mother, nay," cried her little son impatiently, "indeed there is no harm in it, and the lass that sings the song is as pretty a lass as can be found at Cleobury North, or even at Ludlow for the matter of that. She and I, we picked a button-hole of kingscups, and we edged them fine with violets."

"Nay, lad, nay," insisted his mother; "thee had better leave Pleasance Parton alone. Her name alone is heathenish, and her smile more elfish than I like."

"Mother, even parson smiled upon her last Wednesday. 'Come to my class, little lassie,' he said, after he had heard her sing, 'and I'll teach thee some pretty verses about the Saviour child, while Bill and Robin Milner shall make soft music for thee on their fiddles.' There, mother, there, there cannot be much harm in a maid that parson bids come to school and church; and come Easter Sunday she is to sing in our own church, for Pleasance told me so herself. I'll go there myself and gay I'll be, for I'll stick a posy-knot in my hat, and wind a ribbon round my crown, and sing with the best of them.' Then Harry broke out again in song, while he caught up the cat and nursed her :

THE WITCH'S COCK

“My love she lives in the old ash tree,
Too-hoo ! Too-hoo ! Too-hee !
There's luck in her cry for you and me,
Too-hoo ! Too-hoo ! Too-hee !
Away, far away,
Where the young hares play,
Come lad, with our feet,
Let us glad time beat,
And sing till the coming of day.’

“Nay, mother, nay,” for the mother tried to stop him, “see, I can hold a Bible in my hand and not turn pale, so there's little harm in the song, and it is a merry jingle.” As he spoke the little boy ran to the dresser and seized with both hands the old family Bible, in which his uncle Ambrose, who was deemed “a scholard,” had written his name and that of his two little sisters who had died in infancy.

All through the bitter afternoon snow never ceased to fall against the little casements, and scuds of wild wind howled and moaned outside.

“It's a terrible night,” murmured Esther, “and puts me to mind of when Job Preen was found in the snow half a mile on the Bridgnorth-road. Thy poor father, lad, will have all he knows to get home.”

The words had scarcely passed her lips when the door was flung violently open, and Simon entered. He threw himself down on the oak settle in front of the glowing fire.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"The mare! the mare!" he sobbed. Then after a minute he turned to his wife and said, "The mare have a-fallen some half-way down the hill, and she's dying. It's been a hard day, and she canna get up."

"Thee is half dead theeself. Have summat, Simon, and Harry and I will go with thee."

"Nay, nay, I have no heart to eat. The loss of Sal spells ruin."

"Stop, then, for this," and his wife brought out a bottle. "Take a sip, and give the rest to the mare." As she spoke Esther clapped a shawl around her head, and so attired followed her husband. Little Harry ran behind them sobbing, for Black Sal was a dear friend of his. In a few moments they found the cart and horse. Simon held her mouth open, and poured down the contents of the bottle. As he did so he spoke encouragingly, but the poor beast only groaned as if in pain. Then little Harry put his arms round her neck and kissed her on the white star on her forehead.

"'Tis no use lass," said Simon in a husky voice to his wife. "The mare's clean done. She war taken with gripes at the Blue Boar, but I hoped to have got her home." As he spoke, Simon and Esther each took a shaft and pushed the cart away from the horse.

"There's many a Christian I could spare

THE WITCH'S COCK

better," said Simon ; and then in silence he and his wife began to load themselves with the contents of the cart, whilst all the while the snow never ceased to fall.

A minute later and the horse rolled over with a groan, kicked feebly, and then remained quite still.

"Poor beast ! it's over now," said Esther, and then she and her husband carried the parcels up the hill. Many times that night they returned for fresh packages, many of which were heavy, whilst the hill was steep.

"Thee father looks a ghost," said Esther to the little boy, "and there's nothing left in the tay-pot to buy another horse. What will become of us ?"

The next day poor Simon lay very ill in bed, in a state of high fever. He was at times delirious, and then called out continually, "Get on mare ! get on !"

Esther was beside herself. "O Lord, if I knew what to do for 'un," she moaned. A neighbour, Polly Poynter, looked in. "Oh, do thee fetch the doctor," the agonised wife cried, "or sure enough the gud-man will die like Black Sal."

"Nay, my dear, send to the witch ; she'll send thee summat as will bring him round. Ben Brazier were miles worse last Micklemas," replied Polly.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Little Harry stood by and listened intently. A few minutes later he seized his cap and ran across the moor. He toiled almost to the summit of the great hill behind the village, until he came to a cottage built of the dark dhustone of the neighbourhood. Outside on a rough seat, beside a grassy bank, threading together a few short-stalked primroses, sat a little rosy-cheeked fair-haired maiden.

"Oh, Pleasance," cried the little boy, "father's dying, give me summat to save him."

Before she could answer there rose before them the gaunt and terrifying form of Maisie Boomer the witch.

"What art thou come for?" she asked in deep piercing tones, and her grey eyes shone like stars. Then Harry told her all that had happened, and implored her to help him.

For a moment the witch looked at him sternly, then a change came over her face.

"I knew thy grandfather," she said gently. "What skill can do shall be done by me." As she spoke she returned to the hut, and brought a small bottle containing a strange dark mixture. "Let thy father take this and it shall be well with him."

Harry thanked her, and was about to return at once, when he heard a fresh mocking voice behind him cry, "Say thy thanks to me also, ill-

THE WITCH'S COCK

mannered urchin," which was followed by peals of elfish laughter.

Harry turned round, and met the eyes of his little playmate, Pleasance. As he descended the mountain he heard her sing :

"O whither, young swain, O whither away ;
Stop with thy true love, with her laugh, and play."

" See, mother, see," said Harry in triumph, as he returned to his home breathless, but much elated. " Father will get well now, and witches are not all wicked."

Simon Bache lay ill for many days, but the witch's cordial had certainly a wonderful effect upon him. It made him sleep, and gradually he regained strength. The death of the old mare was a terrible loss to Simon, for now he had to give up his trade of carrier, as he was too poor to buy another horse. He, therefore, was forced to work for the farmers as he could find employment, doing odd jobs here and there as he could meet with them, and digging up the farm gardens of the neighbourhood.

The loss of the mare was a deep sorrow to his wife, who somehow felt that her husband and she had lost caste, but times were hard, and there was nothing to be done but to wait and try to save a bit, and hope later on that the day would come when her Simon could drive his cart again. Days went by and Easter Sunday came round.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

The grass sprung green in the meadows, and the trees had caught a purple shade from the rising sap. Harry slipped a sprig of golden willow in his hat, and tied a ribbon round its crown as he had seen the carters do. Arrayed in his Sunday best, he followed his father and mother to the old stone Norman Church.

All went as usual till the old clerk, Josiah Bromley, announced just before Parson Hazley mounted into the pulpit, "that a solo would be sung by Pleasance Parton."

Harry, in his excitement, remained standing, although the rest of the congregation had regained their seats. His face beamed with delight as Pleasance, in a clear treble voice, sang the twenty-third Psalm. "My Shepherd is the living Lord" rang through the church, whilst violins accompanied her, and a flute at intervals mingled with the tones of her sweet, clear young voice, and seemed to give a sense of sweet enchantment in that blessed place.

Parson Hazley listened and smiled encouragingly, and then walked up into his pulpit, and preached a long and learned sermon, with numerous Latin quotations which few could understand, but which gave universal satisfaction, for Parson Hazley was loved by all, and as Tom Brand said, "Parson's learning had never washed the human natur' out of 'im."

THE WITCH'S COCK

At last the service was concluded, and Harry stood for a moment in the churchyard watching the young lambs skip over the graves, and bathed in April sunshine. As he thus stood, he felt a little hand laid upon his shoulder.

"Boy," said a clear young voice, "I have something for thee. See, it is an Easter egg, and grandam says it will bring thee luck, and all fair things."

"Aye, Pleasance, I will eat it to-night for supper, and with all goodwill, and as I do so I will wish thee a merry year."

"No thee will not," replied Pleasance tartly. "Thee will come with me and I will tell thee what to do. But it is not cracked, that it must be. We must go to the Giant's Shaft on the top of the Brown Clee, and it is there I will give thee grandam's message."

In silence Harry followed Pleasance up the steep hillside, amongst the boulders of freestone. No colour so far had burst over the hill, only a patch or two of gorse budding slowly, for a later golden glory was visible, and a willow, gay in its soft moonlight dress, caught their eye.

Up the hill marched the little girl singing softly to herself. As they approached the witch's cottage, Pleasance turned to Harry and said, "Boy, there is some as does ill, but not always ill, and grandam says she will make thy fortune.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Fate makes both good and bad." Thus speaking, she continued walking till she reached the great fallen stone that men say was brought there hundreds of years ago by the Druids, and that is known in Shropshire as the "Giant's Shaft."

Both children sat down, and then Pleasance drew from her apron pocket an egg.

"In this is thy fortune," said Pleasance gravely. "It was given grandam by Bill Smout of Muns-low. Thou must lay it in the hollow ash-tree where the wild owls build that hoot round Farmer Davis' barn. Three weeks after thou shalt put it under a hen, and come luck to thee, thou shalt rear the finest cock in Shropshire that shall beat all others in the pit."

Harry took the egg joyfully, and said, "I will make thee my little sweetheart for this, and posy thee on Sundays and holidays."

But Pleasance only laughed, and would not let him kiss her cheek.

As he descended the hill, Harry heard her sing :

"The merry brown cock, he fights in the ring,
Shrill rings his voice, and loud beats his wing,
Borne from the homestead, and bred of the fowl,
Well does he strike, who is hatch'd by the owl.
Too-hoo ! Too-hoo ! Too-hee ! "

On his way back Harry climbed the old ash-tree that grew in a hedgerow surrounded by a



THE ASH TREE.



٦٦٦٦٦٦

٦٦٦٦٦٦

THE WITCH'S COCK

field of sprouting grain. He put in his hands, and out there flew a great brown bird. Then with great care he placed the egg in a nest of down. Never a word he told any one ; only on the twenty-first day afterwards he looked into the nest, and spied to his great and unutterable joy a merry little chirpy chicken.

Deftly he caught hold of the little fluffy creature, and putting it into his cap brought it down.

The old grey hen was hatching as it happened a fine brood of chickens in his mother's out-house. Without a word he left it under her protecting feathers. A few hours later his mother came round, and put her hand under the hen and withdrew his chicken.

"'Tis most like Bill Smout's sort at Munslow that they fight," she said, looking at the chick attentively. "However, 'tis a pretty bird, not unlike the pheasants when they be young."

The little chicken grew and thrrove. It followed the mother hen about, and early developed a belligerent character. He screamed and pecked at the young ducks, crowed fiercely and flapped his short wings when the black hen's brood went near him.

Time passed on, and summer and winter fled by.

One day Tom Brand, the blacksmith, passed.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Harry was standing before the cottage door. "A purty bird thee hast there, my lad," he said, "and a grand fighter, I'll be bound. My own cock is sick, but if thou wilt lend 'im to me I'll fight 'im again Bill Smout's, for he's going to bring a main to Ludlow next week."

Then Harry's heart danced with joy, for now he believed his bird would do great things, and Pleasance's cheering words returned to him.

"Only don't let 'un be killed, man," he said to Tom Brand when he caught him the following day.

"What shall I bring thee back if he wins?" asked Tom.

"A fine strong horse," was Harry's reply, "for so help us, God and the pretty cock, dad shall drive in his cart again."

During the following day Harry remained in a state of breathless suspense. "What will happen? What can happen?" he asked himself a hundred times a day as he sat and watched under the hedge for his friend's return.

Suddenly he saw him driving a new horse, whilst at his feet lay the cock in a bag.

"Cock's well and won," shouted Tom. "There was nothing as could touch him. He was as wise as an owl, and as fierce as the gamest, they all said. Now lad, us will make thy father jump, and

THE WITCH'S COCK

thy mother, too, shall go crazy with joy. Give me a hand, and we'll clap the new beast that I have bought with the winnings into thy father's carrier cart, and we'll give a view-halloo, and then thou shalt tell thy father what thy cock hath done."

Thereupon Harry slipped into the rickety shed, and with the help of his friend pulled out his father's disused cart. In a moment they got the new beast into the shafts. Then the blacksmith shouted long and loud ; upon which Simon and his wife ran out from the garden to learn what had happened.

"See father, see," cried Harry, "what my cock has won," pointing to the new horse. "Mine is a fairy cock, and was given me by the witch's granddaughter."

Then his father came up and shook Tom by the hand, and talked huskily of its being a good job ; but Harry's mother burst into tears, and said, "She knew all along as God could use the fairies and witches too when he was so minded," and they all stood round patting and admiring the sturdy cob.

"We will call him ' Luck,' " said Harry.

The shades of night fell and encircled hill and moorland, but a silver star shone as a light in the far west, and out of the darkness there rose a voice, sweet and clear as any lark, which sang :

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

“ Fair is the fowl from the old ash-tree,
And dear is Luck when he comes to thee,
Merry the world when it jogs with life,
And happy the hour that's free from strife,
Too-hoo ! Too-hoo ! Too-hee !”

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

"It was all along of that there fish-pond, as the monks, 'tis said, a-kept their fish in, as all the 'arm 'appened," Mistress Wycherley was saying. "Happen I have no children, but my sister's is enough."

The speaker was a fine burly woman of the yeoman class. She and her husband, Lawrence Wycherley, lived in the old prior's house at Much Wenlock at the close of the eighteenth century. They kept a large dairy-farm, and the cows grazed in the rich meadow-lands below the abbey. In the summer Mistress Wycherley made excellent butter and cheese, whilst Farmer Wycherley superintended and aided in the cultivation of his land on the hill. He ploughed, sowed, cut his barley, wheat and oats, and used his scythe as well as any man. Every Monday he met his neighbours at the Fox, and the rest of the week worked on his land. The honest pair had no children, and as this was a great sorrow to both they surrounded them-

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

selves with young life by having with them often, some of their nephews from Shrewsbury.

The lad of whom Mistress Wycherley was speaking was the seventh son of her sister, Abigail Bevan, and was called Ambrose. He was a lad of eighteen.

"My poor, dear lad," continued Madam Wycherley, "a better youth I've never known, not quite real, Master Cyril, I'm thinkin'. Your books, sir, or the old place have a-touched 'un somewhere, till I fear it's the angels as he'll be hearin' next."

"Do not fear for him," replied Cyril Anton dreamily; "Ambrose has the better part which nothing can take away," and he smiled.

"Ah, said Madam Wycherley, thee war ever, sir, unlike other parsons. When I war your nursemaid you heard whispers in the trees, and you could sit and listen to the longest sermon that ever his worship preached, and stomached Latin and Greek like lollipops, and then you never cried for a top, or a whistle, and when your Aunt Clemmy gave you a hobby-horse, you gave it slap to a beggar-boy. You always heard, and saw different from other folks. There's some as is born good, and it's mighty hard for them as hasn't the Lord's mark from the beginning. But my poor lad, I can't a-bear the thought as he's a-slippin' through our fingers. I took 'im away

THE ABBEY FARMERY.





THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

from his bouncing, roaring brothers, for 'tis little they think of, does Bill, Absalom, Dan, and David, but baitin' of bears and bulls, fightin', single-stick and cock-matchin'; but Ambrose war different from the first."

"Ambrose is a good lad," said the Reverend Cyril Anton. "He is good and wise, and his soul is set on higher things." The speaker looked singularly young, although he was really over thirty. He was very slender, had red hair, deep-set grey eyes, a delicate complexion, and stammered slightly at times.

"Thee hast taught him a lot," pursued Mistress Wycherley with admiration; "there isn't much now as my lad doesn't know. He reads in all the learned books. 'Mother,' he says—you know, sir, his way with me—'there's a mighty deal in readin', there's beautiful stories of knights and ladies, kings and queens, but best of all there's saints and martyrs,' and then his face lighted up like a star, and it seemed to me as if he'd had a vision. If my darling war better," she added sadly, "he wouldn't hold to such things, but bein' as he is, and a seventh child, he takes to the nature of this place. Folks talk of the wickedness of the old monks, and of their carryin's on, but it seems to me as it has a-brought him peace."

"Aye," said Cyril softly, "and hope."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"Have it your own way, Master Cyril," said Mistress Wycherley. "If God can't spare him, 'tis good Ambrose 'ul be, and fit for His kingdom."

Then Cyril mounted the stone newel staircase, and went into the little dimity-hung chamber where the invalid was lying in his bed. The soft light of a frosty winter day rested on his bright intelligent face, and in his thin white hands he held a book.

As his friend entered, Ambrose laid his volume aside and held out both hands joyously towards him.

"Oh, sir, I am glad to see you. You will make all clear and easy."

Cyril took both his hands and said, "Are you better, lad?"

"I am happy. Every one is kind, and then God's kingdom seems very near. Last night my aunt came, and cried outside my door after the doctor's visit. I was so sorry for her, for I seem, sir, so little worth weeping for. I know I cannot live long, and I feel a sad trouble. All have done what they can. Old Sally even saved for me two eggs from her speckled hen, but I couldn't eat them, and yet I never was so happy."

"You have found God," said Cyril reverently. "We are all happy when we touch His hand, whatever else happens."

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

"Ah!" answered Ambrose dreamily, "that is the great secret, but it took me long to know it. You see, sir, it is a hard matter to give up the world. It is a terrible renunciation till you have reached the light."

"God chastens those He loves, Ambrose. We may not reach His glory till we have gone through deep waters, and sometimes we must follow Him through fire and death."

"Sir, you know it all," said Ambrose simply. Then, after a pause, he added, "It broke my heart at first to give up all my earthly hopes. You see, sir, two years ago the world seemed made for me. It seemed almost my nut to crack. I took a brilliant scholarship at Shrewsbury, and Squire Dalison took a fancy to me and promised to send me up to college, and to make a gentleman of me; and so the doors of learning all seemed open before me, and beyond——" and Ambrose hesitated, blushing like a girl.

"Yes," said Cyril, "tell me."

"Well, sir," continued Ambrose, "I thought I heard the great waves from the outer world beyond, and my boat seemed to be driven on with full sail down the stream, and I dreamt I should do great things. Write, perhaps be a famous author, playwright or poet—who knows? for I knew I had fancy and imagination—make a name, in short, for myself, and marry some day my pretty

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

cousin Nancy. Then came little Kester's accident, and the sun went out of my life. I yearned for my old strength and health, for the promise of prosperity lay very near my heart."

"How did it all happen? I was away; tell me."

"Well, sir, I was out with Kester, my youngest brother. He was only a little lad, and you must know it was winter-time, and it so happened that one end of the old abbey fish-pond was safe to skate on and the other rotten. Whilst I was cutting figures where the ice was sound, I suddenly heard a scream. It seemed aunty's old grey goose had come for a drink, and Kester, in a fit of mischief, tried to catch her, and in attempting to do so had slipped and fallen into the hole left for the water-fowl to swim in. I lay on the ice and tried to pull out the little boy, but couldn't reach him, so I took my coat off and jumped in. I got him out, but the ice cracked as I did so, and when they pulled me out I was numb and cold, and 'it was long,' my aunt says, 'before they brought me round.' Well, sir, I was never well after that; shivering fits would return, and I took to coughing. Dr. Polsen did all he knew. He bled me often, but it did me little good. I seemed to get weaker and weaker. In the midst of my weakness, perhaps on account of it, I had a longing, oh, but a wild, mad longing, to do something brave and noble, and worthy of a man. I was seized with

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

a passion suddenly to be a soldier, and at nights I would lie awake reading out of an old book, by one Sir Thomas Malory, stories about King Arthur and his knights, of their quests and feats at arms, and I longed to hurtle, as they did, against their foes, and fight as did joyous Sir Launcelot and pure Sir Galahad. Foolish dreams, sir, foolish dreams," Ambrose repeated, and ceased speaking abruptly.

"And now?" inquired Cyril.

"Oh, sir, for months I have known it may not be, and even Nancy I am willing to give up. One white celestial figure has guided me. The cloud has lifted, and it is well."

"You see His light; the incarnation shows us, dear lad, the greatness of our abasement by the splendour of His redemption."

"Yes, yes," and Ambrose smiled. "It is not long that I shall live, and I shall barely see the new year in. But it is His pleasure, and that is enough for me. I can say now, with the old writer of the 'Christian's Pattern,' 'Enlighten me, O good Jesus, with a clear shining light, and drive away all darkness from the habitation of my heart.' We are weak, and all need His Light; but we must remember His light comes not through our merit, but alone through His grace."

Then Cyril knelt down and prayed fervently. "Dear brother," he said, as he rose from his knees,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

there is a great glory in the passing of an illuminated soul, and I thank God that I may be a witness of such."

That evening being Christmas Eve, Mistress Wycherley had made great preparations for the hospitable entertainment of all her friends and neighbours. Joints of smoking beef, whole turkeys, and geese, steamed upon the great oak board, and piles of mince-pies, and cakes towered up in pewter dishes. Bowls of hot beer and punch stood by, and all was ready for the feast.

She had placed little tables near the great open carved fire-place, where a roaring fire was burning. There it was proposed later on in the evening the older guests should divert themselves by playing such old card games as "Bold Davey," "Wheezy," "Wheezy Wee," and "Croodle-do." The great stone altar, which formed in earlier days the chief feature of the prior's private oratory, was decked by a great blue mug which contained branches of glistening holly, and was illuminated by two lighted tapers on each side.

"We must lift Ambrose down," said Cyril to his host. "He has just told me that he wishes it. He wants to see the children play, and is curious about his cousin's beryl-stone; and then once more he wishes to see the Star of Bethlehem."

"Poor lad!" said kindly Farmer Wycherley huskily, "'tis not long that us can do his pleasure.

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

He never says a cross word. Now when I get twinges of the gout I swear sometimes, though I be sorry for it afterwards, bain't I, Bess?" and he turned to his wife.

"So thou be," replied his wife cheerily, "but, lad, I takes no notice of it. The Lord, I hold, will surely take gout into consideration, and when he hears a hasty word, like enough he will not write 'em all down."

"Well, sweetheart," said her husband tenderly, "thee never thinks what I does much amiss. I've got my luck, Master Cyril, at home, as I told Ben Cowdel yesternight, even should the roan cow die of milk-fever."

Mistress Wycherley looked at her husband with honest pride. "God bless thee for sayin' that," she murmured, as she turned round joyously in all the bravery of a cherry-coloured sacque, purple petticoat, mittens and spotless mob-cap.

"There's more mince-pies and plum-puddings in the larder," she said, looking at the prepared feast. "Sure," she added, "I don't think as the abbot and his monks could have done better, and 'tis only right, Master Cyril, and according to the ordinance of God, that we hold high festival at the birth of the blessed Child."

"It is well, dame, to be joyous," answered Cyril, "and we shall all eat of your good fare with thankfulness."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"So you will," said Mistress Wycherley, "for though I be a sinful woman, there's none as can bake with me this side of the Clee. Let Sally Dyke say what her will, but she can't see true, havin' a squint, and hasn't truth in her tongue neither ; but where shall us put the lad ?" and the good dame looked round the long low chamber, in search of a convenient place.

"Why, in father's chair," said Farmer Wycherley. "I shall be rovin' about, gettin' a turn at 'Blind Man's Buff,' and like enough takin' a hand later at 'Bold Davey,' as the even wears on, so he's welcome to it. Christmas comes but once a year, and 'tis good for the old 'uns to play a bit. We wants to keep our hearts young, although we gets a bit of snow on our pates." Then Cyril and Lawrence mounted the stairs, and going to the little eastern chamber bore down in their arms the sick boy. Once they stopped whilst Ambrose had a bad fit of coughing. Then they placed him tenderly in the high chair by the roaring log fire, and Mistress Wycherley placed a pillow behind his head, and enveloped him in her best quilt, which she fetched from an oak chest.

"It was worked by your mother, Master Cyril, and if I hadn't a rag left in the world I wouldn't sell it. She war a born lady war Madam Anton, and now she's one of God's angels."

As she spoke there arose from outside a violent

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

barking and yelping from the farm dogs, and in a long procession the guests entered. There was Farmer Hotchkiss of Callaughton, Caleb Mapp, the chief mercer of the old borough, and his wife; then came Thomas Harley, Jeremiah Kernsey and his pretty daughter Indiana; Rachel Gosden, and Madam Burnell and her lively daughter Nancy. Then followed several attendant swains, amongst whom were Cornelius Corme, Enos Bache, and Aaron Boare. Besides, and after these, filed in the ploughmen, shepherds and herdsmen of the farm, and Mistress Wycherley's maids, for in those simple days all members of a farm and household took part in the Christmas-tide rejoicings.

"Ye are welcome, welcome," cried honest Farmer Wycherley, standing on his threshold, and looking like a benignant giant. "'Tis a jolly sight, wife," he continued, "to see so many good friends and neighbours," and he held the door wide open for them all to pass. "We'll warm ye all as the missus and I have a-done this thirty years."

Then the guests entered and seated themselves before the hospitable board, and merry peals of laughter resounded on all sides.

"The wag of the tongues bain't too much for thee, Ambrose," asked his aunt in a pause.

The youth shook his head.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"Thee must eat summat," exclaimed Madam Wycherley, and as she spoke she brought him a plate of pasties and sweetmeats.

"Put down they pies, Master Cyril," she cried, "and let the good-man give thee a slice of proper English beef, and a bit of Yorkshire pudding. Thee'll overtire theeself by messin' round after other folks' comforts, and thee has to preach to-morrow, for parson's gone to spend his Christmas with Squire Langford at Ellesmere."

"I'm enjoying myself," laughed Cyril, "handing round your good things, dame."

"Well, thee must cut thy course, but let us have your message straight to-morrow, your worship."

"I will tell you what I know," answered Cyril simply; "and I thank God," he added, "that I have faithful hearts to whom I can tell His news." Then he took a stool and sat by Ambrose, and the two sat together and talked somewhat apart.

"Be not troubled, dear lad," Cyril said in answer to Ambrose. "The last step of reason is to realise that there are many things in life she cannot reach, and knowledge is only human when it cannot understand this truth. Faith is the flight of the soul to higher regions. Faith is above reason, yet, believe me, never against her."

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

"You help me, sir," replied Ambrose. "When you speak all becomes clear. I pray God before I die I may die to sin, but if I do, it will be through His love and grace."

Some half an hour later the toasts began.

"The King!" cried honest Farmer Wycherley, and Ambrose struggled up whilst glasses clinked, and there arose a murmur of "God bless him!" for just then the country was at war and the heart of England beat loyal and true to its ruler. Then followed a toast to the Church, to which Cyril responded gravely in a few simple words.

"He prayed God," he said, "that he might be of service to His flock, and guide them in time to those green hills far away where all might rest in peace."

After which the party broke forth into joviality and goodfellowship. They toasted fox-chasing, the squires, and the jolly borough of Much Wenlock, and wound up by drinking to the good health of true and loyal hearts "all round the Wrekin."

After which Farmer Wycherley announced that there would be running, and dancing, games for the children and young people, and cards for their elders; but begged those who could, before they left the table, to give the company a song.

So, shyly, one after another each rose and sung such well-known ballads as "Old Mother Mow,"

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"Jack a Faa, the Gipsy Lad," "Away with my Dearie on the Mountain Side," and many others. Amongst those who sang, none sung better than pretty Nancy Burnell.

"She's as gay as a lark, and her eyes be as bright as stars," said Lawrence admiringly. "It does us old 'uns good to see such a lass, and calls back to mind the days gone by when we went a-courtin'." As he spoke he stood by his wife and took her hand.

"There's that ball as us musn't forget; what dost call it, Nan?" said Madam Wycherley after a little pause. "Let's see what's goin' to happen, so be there's no harm in the matter or black witchcraft."

"There's no harm, Aunt Bess," was Nancy's reply. "'Tis a pretty toy, see, and on the silver ledge are written the names of three angels, Raphael, Gabriel, and Uriel, so it belongs in no wise to Satan, or to any manner of evil spirit."

"How do us play"? inquired Lawrence puzzled.

"I must hold the ball, and then two must lay their hands upon my wrists," answered his niece, "and so be you wish it, I will take the crystal first and then pass it on to your guests, and, uncle, we will each declare what we see in turn."

"My dear, if I was young, I know what I'd wish to see," remarked Lawrence gallantly. "But come, you Tom, and Cornelius, and don't be bash-

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

ful ; stand by the maid, ye shall get your turns soon enough."

Then Nancy stepped forth from the general group. The lights from the tapers shone down upon the fair young face and lit up her rich chestnut hair. She was dressed in a white sacque, and at her breast wore a spray of glistening holly. They put the beryl-stone into her hands.

"What see you, my maid?" inquired her aunt eagerly.

"Just a fair summer's day, sunshine and roses, and in my ears I hear a melody of laughter."

"Then all is going to be very joyous," said Ambrose, and turned away with a sigh. "Cornelius is a lucky fellow," he said to himself, and looked into the fire, whilst for a second a tear rose to his eyes.

Then Cornelius drew nearer Nancy and looked. "It is as you say, mistress, sunshine, roses and summer," and the eyes of the two met ; but Tom Harley reddened and cried out angrily "that he could only see things quite different—winter, snow and blustering gales"—and he flung himself away in a pet, vowing "that the whole matter was a foolish superstition, and fit only for old spinsters to indulge in when they drank Bohea and nursed their tom-cats."

"Nay, nay, man," cried Mistress Wycherley reprovingly, "let us play the Christmastide games

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

and give ourselves up to merriment. Besides," she added slyly, "there be no diversion yet invented in which both sides can gain the stakes."

Then the ball was passed round. When it came to Farmer Wycherley, he asked, "What am I to see? There seems a deal of learning needed for this game and a ready tongue, and 'tis a long time since I war at school." He took the crystal. "I see nothin'," he said simply.

"Not even a cow gettin' better?" asked Mistress Wycherley eagerly, for she had hoped that her husband at least might have prophesied the swift recovery of her best cow, Roan Ramsay.

"Nay, dear life! I sees nothin' but a glamour and a bit of thy face. Well, lass, that'll do for me."

Then Lawrence passed on the ball to another guest. Most of them imagined that they saw something in the crystal, and if they did not they invented some tale which provoked laughter.

Madam Mapp declared that she saw, when she looked in, a vision of a rich satin gown of a matchless crimson shade; but Caleb, her husband, assured her "that such attire alone found hanging-room in Spanish castles, and that seeing materials in crystals was quite another thing from having them safe and sound in her oak chest at home." Upon which the poor lady was much aggrieved, and

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

retorted, "Folks might see what they pleased, for cats might look at a king."

During this discussion Enos Bache took the ball. "I can see nothing," he complained, "unless a lass will hold my hand. The magic will not work alone." As he spoke he took hold of pretty Indiana Kernsey's wrist. "Ah!" he said, "now I know there's magic, and all of the right sort. A trim house in the high-street is what I see; a sunny parlour and a merry lass spinning, and I hear her singing. What was the song you sang, Mistress Indiana, at Madame Joyce's love-spinning? Ah! I remember,

"' All the world is fair,
And Love he calls from every bush.'

It was a merry jingle," and he hummed the tune.

Then Indiana took the beryl-stone, but Enos declared there was no need for her to speak, and so she blushed, and later they stood apart from the rest, and seemed so interested in what each had seen in the magic ball, that Mistress Wycherley maliciously declared, a sound of marriage bells was in the air.

At last Lawrence turned to Ambrose. "Look in, lad," he said, "if thou hast a mind," and he laid the stone in his nephew's hands.

"What dost see?" inquired his aunt. "Fear

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

nothing. Spring will come, and summer, and if one doctor's physic cannot cure thee mayhap another's will."

But Ambrose only smiled. "Light! light! nothing but light," he said; and he placed once more the crystal in his pretty cousin's hands, saying as he did so, "Coz, may your summer be very sweet and your roses never fade." Then he fell back coughing, and lay worn and weary in his chair.

For a few moments all looked grave, for they realised how ill he was, and all loved Ambrose for his gentle heart.

Then old Sally Hill, Lawrence's old nurse, according to her own verdict, the finest plucker of geese in Shropshire, went up to her master. "We wants somethin' merry, maister," she said, "tis unlucky to be down-hearted, and not sound religion neither, at least not as I have heard it taught these seventy years and odd."

So the world fell a-laughing, and Lawrence bid Paul Dossett strike up a tune, and then the maids should blindfold him. "For I have the best right to be first blinded," he said, "for I'm, ye all know, the biggest."

Then Sally bound her master's eyes with madam's best nankeen handkerchief, and loud was the laughter and great the merriment, as the

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

gentle giant dodged here and there, and the children leapt in and out of his arms.

Later on the older members of the party sat down to cards, and played such old-fashioned games as "Beggar my Neighbour," "Pots on the Fire," and "My Bird sings," whilst all the while the blind fiddler played. Lovers danced or sat apart, whilst the hinds and ploughmen ducked into a bran-tub, and brought out with their mouths little gifts provided by Madam Wycherley.

Suddenly, as the clock struck midnight, there came from outside the sound of voices singing.

Madam Wycherley opened the door that led into the garden and stood expectant on the threshold. The snow lay crisp and pure underfoot, whilst overhead the stars shone tranquilly.

"They are coming," said Cyril, "coming to bring good news of God." As he spoke men entered the house bearing in their arms a board with a thick covering of clay, in which were planted many little rush tapers.

"Where shall us stand the holy sign?" asked Jack Everall, the village blacksmith.

"'Tis best on the altar, for they say it brings a double blessing there," replied Mistress Wycherley.

The men stood the board upon the great stone altar, and then a little boy with curly flaxen hair and blue eyes advanced, and with a torch lighted in turn all the little candles.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"What is thy name, little one?" said Lawrence as he passed.

"I am Gabriel," was the child's answer, "and kind Master Lawley have a-taken me from the poorhouse, and I'm going to be happy, happy."

Ambrose looked up. "So happy?" he inquired.

"Yes, maister," replied the little boy joyously. "For now I've a top of my own, and maister lets me ride in his cart, and grandam gave me puddin' to-day and two red pippins, and next year I'm to ride Mistress Molly's ass on messages. I'm as happy as a leveret in clover."

"So happy," repeated Ambrose dreamily to himself. "Gabriel is gaining all he wants and I am losing all, yet God understands, and is giving me the better portion."

Then the men broke into song and sang a sweet old-world carol. "Let nothing you dismay," resounded through the old monks' chamber.

As they ceased singing Ambrose knew that the everlasting light surpassing all created lights had shed its calm radiance into his heart, and that though an earthly life was not for him a sweeter lay beyond. In his soul he was exceedingly glad, and said that night, with the pious monk of Mount St. Agnes, "Lord, Thou hast made me through thy love greatly to rejoice; supply streams of devotion to water the face of the earth that it may bring forth good and excellent fruit."

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

As Ambrose laid his head upon his pillow there came to him God's fairest of all gifts—His Peace that passeth human understanding—and Ambrose knew that he could rest content in the safety and in the mercy of the Divine Will.

THE HOLY WELL

IT was an exquisite day in May, such as the poets from all time have sung about, and such a day as makes folks believe that rain and hail and snow are but the imagination of distorted brains. The lilac-bush in the back garden of the Abbey Farm was budding into white fragrant sprays, whilst the great horse-chestnut that grows by the Lady Chapel was lighted up by a perfect glow of dainty white candles. A bright border of hen-and-chicken daisies smiled in front of the old oak door as Mistress Wycherley stood in person, a happy and jocund expression lighting up her handsome face. By her waited her little cousin, Thersa Stanley, a thin, fragile-looking, little black-eyed maid of nineteen years, with a pathetic, somewhat wistful, look at times in her eyes, and a sweet rare smile that was almost saintly in its sweetness. She was a cousin of Mistress Wycherley's—the daughter of poor Bill Stanley of the Dyke Farm. Her father, it was said, had gone off years ago to the foreign wars, and had married a French lass whom he had brought back after some years of

THE HOLY WELL

soldiering to Shropshire. After a time Thersa, his only child, had come to live, often for long spells at a time, with the honest couple at the Abbey Farm.

Thersa was slight and slender, "but her can churn with the best," Mistress Wycherley would say. "Spirit's somethin', though when there's brawn too, 'tis better. But she's honest is Thersa," she would assert with pride, "for her'll scrat afore her pecks, which is more than many 'ull do nowadays. I don't hold to foreigners, leastways I can't stand their jargon," Mistress Wycherley would add, "for God Almighty made the British tongue and what's outside that is pure heathendom, and if Thersa have aught good in her, it comes of her English upbringing and not because of her mother and her foreign idols."

As Mistress Wycherley stood watching, her hand before her eyes, for the sun was bright, she suddenly saw the gate leading into the highway thrown quickly open, and her husband and old Uncle Cuthbert Codgers ride in on two stout nags. The good dame gave a cry of joy and ran forward to greet her husband.

"Well, lass, and how art thou?" cried the honest farmer, and he jumped down and embraced his wife heartily. "Why, lass," he said admiringly, "thou lookest as fresh as a spring daisy. Thou'l be piercing my heart again with a silver pin," and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

he laughed at the thought loud and jovially, and called upon Cuthbert to say "whether his Bess was not as fresh as paint and as gay as a daffadowndilly at Easter-time, for all that she had a-wedded some thirty summers agone?"

"Sure enough, she wears well does Bess," replied his uncle, "and summer and winter alike. Honest work and honest pleasure they be the recipes for jolly roses and a good appetite. Early to bed and early to rise ; but you know, wench, the truth of the old sayin' and that the old words be true same as the comin' round of seasons, for they be the wisdom of the pious grafted on the wits of sharpshins."

Here Farmer Codgers was interrupted by his host calling out in a stentorian voice, "Come on lads, stable the nags" ; and in a minute or two, two stout fellows ran up in smocks and led the horses to the ruined cloisters which in those days formed the farmhouse stableng.

"Thee doesn't know Thersa, I be thinking," said Mistress Wycherley pointing to her cousin.

"And doesn't want to," said the old man grumpily. "Them as has foreign blood I can't abear. They be to me same as rats or weasels. Marryin' foreigners spoils the breed. It brings lies, blarney, false ways and idle habits into the land" ; and as he spoke Cuthbert rudely turned his back full upon the young girl.

THE HOLY WELL

"Thee must wait till thee knows our lass better," laughed Mistress Wycherley. "For all Thersa's a bit foreign she doesn't stir pudding with an awl, and is as busy as a dog in dough at cock-crow."

"Well, niece, have it as you will," returned Codgers somewhat mollified, "but I'm as dry as a keck (hemlock) in harvest-time, so take me in and give me a drop of your best home brew."

Bess led her guest into her parlour, a low ancient stone chamber with mullion windows, and guarded by the old iron bars of abbey times. A posy of fragrant lilacs stood in a jar, and round the walls were hung samplers, which the good dame had worked herself in her youthful days, and a picture or two by a young artist, which he had left in place of money.

"Well," said Cuthbert, as he seated himself in a high-backed oak chair, and stretched out his legs, "I'm glad I'm here. It be quite warm ; lets hope it 'ull be same to-morrow at the Wishin' Well, for I suppose all the lads and lasses of the country side 'ull be there."

"Right enough, uncle," replied Mistress Wycherley, as she poured forth for her husband's old uncle a foaming beaker of her best home-brewed ale.

"Hearts and kisses be allus in fashion same as colic and physic later," snarled the old man

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

cynically. "One comes afore t'other, but t'other allus comes."

"Thou art a good-for-nothing old bachelor," laughed Mistress Wycherley. "Who wilt have to mourn thee at thy burial?"

"Better less tears if I gets more peace whilst alive," retorted Cuthbert. "There be a deal of talk of the bliss of childers. Bliss of thunder and lightnin', say I, and of green gooseberries and crab-apples. If you wants to be liked by the young 'uns have but small dealin's with 'em. Then they're grateful. Seein' much, means despisin' often."

"For shame, uncle!" broke in Mistress Wycherley, "thee sees the world through vinegar spectacles, I through honeyed ones, and Lawrence sees like me. My man," she said with pride, "he be that good, that he makes others like 'im. He seems a walkin' sermon without words. If you believe in folks 'tis wonderful how they gets to believe in themselves. 'Tis almost as good as bein' able to turn in sunshine in dark December."

"Well, I know," said Cuthbert, "as thee and Lawrence makes holiday of work. I've saved much but I've never been able to buy that. 'Tis a pretty art I'll allow," and the old man looked wistfully at his hostess; then he added, "but it brings some down the river like Jimmy Glover's

THE HOLY WELL

cat. We can't all drink of that cup. However, another glass of thy ale," and he pointed to the fragrant ale.

Then Bess filled his glass afresh and sat beside him and the two fell a-talking.

"Who will come to the Wishin' Well?" he asked.
"I mind me to thy feast."

Whereupon Bess enumerated her guests. "There be Jack and Henry Dart, Launcelot and Joshua, Mistress Spearman, Florrie and Nancy Benthall and Bella Milner, the finest lass in Salop."

"Be she?" said old Cuthbert grimly. "Our cat has a fine tail now it seems. I remember Bell when she was mucky and mixen-covered, but now since her mother have a-come into a fine fortune her pouts, and struts, fine as Madam Weld's peacock did."

"Ah! thee should see her dresses," interrupted Mistress Wycherley."

"I know," said the old man sulkily. "They be enough to set the town on fire—flame and scarlet. But then I hold as a plain woman will look plain for all the tozzle she claps on."

"But Bella's not a plain dough-faced wench," objected Mistress Wycherley. "Her has real roses in her cheeks, and her carries herself same as the Quality when they go to assembly-rooms and horse-racin'."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"She's gaudy as a daffadowndilly," muttered Cuthbert, "but Lord love yer, Bess, yer be like 'em all, yer like side and tinsel, and the more noise, the more music. As Jan Malt said, the louder, noisier, flashier and more mak'-believe, the finer wenches yer call 'em."

"How wud yer have us, uncle?" asked Mistress Wycherley tartly. "There's a time for everythin'—a time to scrub and clean, and a time to plume, and take your pleasure in. But 'tis only the wise, in man or woman, as knows how to do both. Dost think as Lawrence wud like naught but a dish-clout cleaner, or pewter scrubber. Nay, nay, 'tis well to work, to keep your garnish of pewter clean, and to rise at daybreak, but 'tis also wise to play wisely, and as much an instinct from God as the rest."

"As thou wilt, mistress," replied old Cuthbert. "Thou hast a billowy tongue, and makes a fellow feel the ripples on, for all he's as sober as a judge."

As he spoke Cuthbert got up. At the open door stood Thersa.

"Oh, coz!" she exclaimed, "they have come, Mistress Milner and Bell. They are seeking thee, and Bell looks fit for a princess. Her dress shimmers like sunshine as she walks, and it flames forth like a bush of roses when it catches the light. They be in the garden with Farmer Lawrence."

"I will go and join them," said Bess. "But

THE HOLY WELL

say, lass, are the beds ready? and hast thou begun to boil the ham in the great pot? and are the capons plucked? To-night our supper must be of the best. And be the cakes browning well in the oven? They should be fit for the High Sheriff."

Mistress Wycherley did not wait for a reply, but rattled on breathlessly. At last she paused, and then Thersa proceeded to tell her that all was well.

"The capons be plucked," she said, "and the cakes be turning a beautiful brown, and the ham be gently boiling, and war begun in cold well-water."

"Thee art a pretty 'un to work, Thersa, for all thy mother has a foreign name I can ill screw my mouth to speak," said Mistress Wycherley, "and in cake-making thou art as sharp as a needle. I have never caught thee drowning the miller baking days. Where thou gettest thy sense from I canna say, for thy poor father be as uncunning as a Christmas piglet, and foreigners be heathen, so it be a mystery; but sure thou wud be a sharpshins if thou wert Shropshire bred."

At this Thersa, feeling vaguely that a kind word was intended even if doubtfully expressed, replied, "Getting on with thee is no hard matter. 'Tis like feelin' light-hearted Mayday"; and she laughed softly, then almost immediately she left her cousin to attend to numerous duties.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

The mistress of the Abbey Farm in the meantime went out to meet her guests. Madam Milner and her daughter were walking in the little old kitchen-garden framed round with high brick walls. The borders were brightened here and there by tufts of the late double narcissus, and gay patches of tulips and dielytra, or "dollys" as the country folks call them.

"I heard," said Mistress Wycherley, "as you were here with Lawrence."

"Lawrence have just been this minute left," replied Madam Milner, "but your garden is that pretty, Cousin Bess, that I and Bell could hardly tear ourselves away," and the two women ran forward and embraced. "'Tis gay as Shrewsbury Town at fair-time, or as Ludlow on Holy Thursday."

"Please God us will have a merry time tomorrow," said Mistress Wycherley, "for they come, Cousin Patty, from all parts."

Then she turned to Bell Milner, who looked as gay as a tulip and all flame with her red bonnet in the brilliant sunshine, and said laughing, "No need of pins, crooked or silver, for thee, for thy roses and pretty plumes will do the job. I hear," added Mistress Wycherley, "that Charlie Morgan from Ludlow, and Launcelot Shingler will ride from Bridgnorth, and they be pretty fellows with farms, and steadings of their own, and what more

THE HOLY WELL

can a maiden want, unless she be an earl's daughter."

At this she noticed that Bell flushed, and like a wise woman guessed that what she had unwittingly said was, according to her own expression, "may-happen true."

Then Madam Milner asked of what the ceremony would consist.

"It will be just as usual," replied her hostess. "In the morning parson and Master Cyril will hold the service, and afterwards the choir and those that will, will walk the churchyard with green boughs and flowers. Thersa and our maid, May Cheriton, will foller with branches of hawthorn and bunches of cheorls (wallflowers), and the scholars will come forward in clean chintz gowns and white apurns, and the young men will walk with sprays of cowslips and oxlips, and their hats tied round with blue ribbon, and after they have all a-paced the town, and sung such old songs as 'Daisies Nine,' 'The Lord He breathes through Verdant Green,' and 'Up in a far Hill where Throstles pipe,' we shall sit down, and the strong men will drink ale made from water saved in butts from the church roof, and the lasses and the lads will drink water sweetened with honey, and some will play on a fiddle, and others tootle on the flute, and Jakes Hanway will sound the loud bassoon, and later, in the meadow below the abbey, the boys and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

girls will dance, till the glow-worms appear in the grass and the stars peep out overhead. It will be a merry day, and I love Holy Thursday, for it be a time of great rejoicings, and it brings back to me the time when I and Lawrence were young, and I threw my pin, and caught his heart sure enough."

"That thee did, lass," said a loud hearty voice, and Farmer Wycherley flung back the garden gate and strode into the red gravel path. "This be trim as needs be, for it be Bess's bower and plea-saunce," he said addressing Madam Milner, "and you never seed Bess save spruce and neat as a silver pin, God bless her! Some folks look drabbed, dirty, and mixen-heaved, but you put her where you will, churning or scouring, and my Bess allus looks a sight for sore een. Fresh, frank, godly and wholesome, that's how I like the woman-kind."

"Well," interrupted Madam Milner laughing, "after long years of marriage this be somethin' like. Most husbands see the faults of wives same as hired chaps the failings of the maister, but as to you and Bess it seems yer burn candles to each other all the way, and find new perfections in each other like an unwedded couple."

"I have a-married a dear wench," said the honest farmer.

Mistress Wycherley's eyes filled with happy

THE HOLY WELL

tears, as she laid one hand in his for an instant and whispered, "Lawrence, yer be as loyal as Mike Dobson's dog."

"So said old Sheldon," replied her husband laughing.

But Bess would not allow her statement to be treated with ridicule, and vowed "It war a right good thing to look back after many years of marriage, and feel that life had slipped by like a happy dream, and for all the touch of snow that was creeping on both their pates that they were sweethearts yet."

"Let the young 'uns," she said, "throw their pins, there's not one of the lasses as wull find as true a heart as my Lawrence's."

"'Tis all gammon and spinach now," snarled old Cuthbert Codgers. "There be no sentiment left. The lasses they only want fine clothes for their backs, no work and holiday-making ; sentiment be dead these sixty years agone. The young 'uns can't write rhymes as them used. They haven't no fancy now. When I war young every chap wrote or sung about his Nancy's eye-brow, or praised his Chloe's lips."

"Still," said Bess, "there's real love, I'll be bound, whatever yer say, and whatever they call it. You won't, uncle, come limber over me as far as all that. God's sunshine is not gone all behind a cloud. 'Tisn't every man as carries a black dog

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

on his back, and there be some as sees the stars for all the night is black."

Then honest Lawrence gave a loud guffaw, and cried out, "Uncle Codger's got one eye tinin' and the other carryin' trout," which is a country way of saying that a man is drowsy and drifting into a backwater of life.

At this sally they all laughed and went in to supper. During their meal Thersa waited on her cousin's guests in a chintz sacque and an irreproachable home-spun apron that Mistress Wycherley herself had spun some years ago.

"Thee had best sit down, lass," said Lawrence good-naturedly.

"Let me be," pleaded Thersa smiling. "The apurn's spotless, and Rose and May be out with the calves, so I'm here to give a hand. There's no disgrace in waitin' if one does it proper."

Then Bell looked up haughtily, and remarked to her mother "that some might foller their fancy but she didn't think that *she* could ever bring herself to wait at table."

At this speech old Farmer Codgers looked up from his plate of turkey pie and said, "There's some as lies in clover, and thinks theirselves useful."

"Beautiful," corrected Madam Milner acidly.

"The same, madam," asserted the old farmer, "but 'tis best to wait till the young fellows

THE HOLY WELL

tell your maid that. Puttin' compliments into wenches' mouths be like ploughin' the headlands afore the butts. Soft sawdor in the wrong place may turn to vinager," and with that the old man crammed a large portion of food into his mouth and sat glaring at Bell and Madam Milner.

"Let the petticoats be, uncle," said Lawrence good-naturedly. "There's little glory in killing flies, or in fightin' females. The Willey peacock knows as he's a fine fellow, and why shouldn't Bell know that she's a bonny lass ?"

"Bonny lass," retorted Cuthbert, "paint and feathers, glare and tozzle, these are what make fine women nowadays. Go, my girl, and learn how the hedge-rose decks herself, and how the buttercup glitters in the sun. When thee can blow forth like one of they I'll call thee a bonny lass."

But here Madam Milner interposed, with flushed cheeks. "We are accustomed to courtesy," she said loftily. "In fact we consider ourselves, Bell and I, hardly second to gentlefolks, and I'd have you to know, Master Codgers, as rude words only come from rude mouths. Them as throws dirt gets dirty—muck from the mixen-heaps, and fleas from unwashed pups—and as to uncivil tongues, they hang in the heads of uncultivated people with the breeding left out, and such like be unfit for the society of genteel persons." So saying,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Madame Milner turned her back as much as she could on Codgers.

During this somewhat furious onset old Cuthbert hummed and hawed, and when the angry dame had finished speaking, cried out in wrathful tones, "Fudge! madam, fudge!" then blurted out, boiling over with rage, "Thee runs on, Martha Milner, mad as a tup in a halter. Thou and thy maid be foolish like heifers loose at a fair. Take a lower place, and then sensible folks will give ye your dues. 'Tis very well to talk of the stars, but ye havn't got to they by a long way. A little money doesn't make a lord, and for all your vapours and grimaces ye can't sit tight in your coach like Job Orton sat in his shop. I knew thy father, honest Josh, who followed his own cart, chucked his own muck, and milked his own cows. Thee and Bell have a-got fine ways and foolish manners, and tries to talk Dutch, same as Darnfold's dog—but at the back of ye, ye are naught but plain Shropshire wenches with no more gentility to boast of than Sally Longman's barn-door fowl."

"Have done, uncle," called out Bess. "Thou hast a tongue sharp as a razor that Nick Harley has sharpened. For shame! See, madam is crying, and thou hast turned Bell's cheeks into peonies' blows. Thou art an ignorant bachelor and therefore much is forgiven thee, but every man

THE HOLY WELL

can get to the end of his rope be it ever so long. At Holy Well time we meets for friendship and 'tis the lasses' own mirhtime, so let the young tongues wag, say I, and the bridle slip a bit, for 'tis in nature so, and nature be right if yer holds her the right way."

At this speech Cuthbert mumbled something about feminine fury, and "a strap being an excellent remedy for a sharp-tongued wench," and then relapsed into silence, falling on his food with increased voracity.

After a chilly pause Madam Milner and Mistress Wycherley began to discuss the making of jams and comfits, the best mode of preparing cowslip and elderberry wines, and the most approved manner of baking soul and Christmas cakes. The rearing of turkey poult and the management of the poultry-yard they also talked over, for in those old and simpler days such topics interested keenly every housewife.

"Us will go round the poultry to-morrow," said Bess proudly, "if thee can rise betimes, Patty. Us have a fine head of birds in the meadow; the specklies be wonderful layers, and my suckin'-gulleys (goslings) be pretty and forward. I pray God no thunderstorm will wet their backs for a month, and then save for a fox they wull be safe onywhere. Thersa be up at four to feed 'em with me every day, regular as a

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

market clock. 'Tis good meat as poultry want—regular, not more than they can eat, not too moist, and in winter-time mixed up hot with boiled milk. Cold and chill, like old Bolas, is how Selinny Dawkins keeps her fowls, but, lor' bless yer! 'tis never an egg she gets at Christmas. God Almighty made the beasts for our comfort, say I, but if yer don't want 'em to be a sorrow yer must see to theirs." With which sage saying the party rose from table.

"We be," pursued Bess, "but a small lot to-night, but may-be ye're tired, cousin, so Thersa, bring a light and show madam and Bell their room. I have prepared for you the central chamber and put a bed for Bell beside her mother."

Then, as they entered the room, Mistress Wycherley pointed to the quilt on the four-poster. "See, Cousin Pat," she said, "'tis my Aunt Hen's own work that thou seest—leaves and flowers. A deal of work but a deal of solace to her, poor soul, I make no doubt, when she war left a widow. I often think that the good God have invented needlework for us womenkind to ease at times achin' hearts, and to make us understand His teachin'. I can see," she continued, "things quite different when I holds a needle. It kind of puts things into shape and clears off worry and trouble as the sun does mists and snow. There's some

THE HOLY WELL

as mun run about, but ye're a poor sort if yer can't be contented with poultry, and an embroidery frame."

To these remarks Madam Milner but faintly assented. Gadding was her passion, for having been recently very poor she thought she never could wear her fine clothes too often. "Fine feathers make fine birds," she would say, "and the world only sees yer as yer look. If yer appears like the Quality, yer will become the Quality sure enough."

As to Bell, she murmured faintly that she preferred a tambour-frame, and a spinet, to such large pieces of work.

Then Mistress Wycherley, after embracing her guests heartily, left, and calling Thersa up the stairs bid her be spry on the following morning, "For," she said, "we must get all done betimes, so that thee and the maids can dance till nightfall. Work first, say I, and pleasure after, for such is the law of God and man."

That evening Bell, instead of going to bed at once, sat up and talked to her mother about the guests who would attend the Holy Thursday festival. There be Jack and Henry Dart, Launcelot Shingler, and Joshua Mills.

"Has Launcelot said aught?" asked Madam Milner eagerly.

"Nay, mother, nay," replied Bell wincing,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"but like enough he'll speak to-morrow. I shall throw a silver pin, and if he stands by, I'll let him know, that I'll not rebuke him, if he gets a bit bold and tells me what I means him to."

"I trust thee for encouraging a lad if he wants a downe tickle," said her mother; "but, in spite of all thy good looks, girl, I fear he's bashful for a cause."

"What dost mean, mother?" said Bell jumping up, and looking hard at her mother. "Last year he was anxious enough, I'm sure. He would have run to Shrewsbury and back to pleasure me."

"This year bain't last," said Madam Milner gloomily. "Thou hast let a good fish out of thy net."

"How could I tell?" said Bell sullenly. "Launcelot a twelvemonth agone had naught but a good-looking face and a straight figure, and we all thought as it was Harry that his old uncle favoured. Talk about girls being fickle, give me old men. They lick the cream one day, and break the jar the next."

"They're as kettle-cattle as St. Swithin's Day," replied Madam Milner, "drunk with fancies, changeful and surly, same as the lap-dogs of the Quality."

"He won't dare not run straight," said Bell savagely. "If he did I'd shame him afore them all."

THE HOLY WELL

"Thee'd best keep quiet," said Madam Milner snappishly, "a furious maid's bound to commit a folly. Anger most time loosens a woman's wits. A quiet way goes further with the men than mountains of words. If thou meanest to win Launcelot, wear thy bravest, my maid, talk thy softest, and, if thou canst, appear a bit scared if so be as a dog barks, or a cow runs round—thus thou wilt play a trump card. The men they like to feel, above all, as we can't get on without 'em. Let a woman physic yer, and a man fight for yer, my old mother used to say, and yer didn't teach mother how to milk ducks, I can tell yer."

"If 'tis wise not to talk of milkin' the ducks, 'tis also good, mother," replied Bell, "to let the squirrels jump as they list. Any way I'll make a running with the best—at least, my sacque and pelisse shall be put in the shade by none. There's a deal of comfort in clothes, especially when you have the right sort, and other folks have the wrong."

"Aye," said Madam Milner cynically, "that be rare medicine. 'Tis better as you be wrong, than I be right, as Pike Hawtry used to say, and he war a cunning fellow."

When Bell crept into bed, she consoled herself with the thought of the splendour of her mantle, and imagined, that her appear-

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

ance would excite a murmur of admiration as she walked down to the Holy Well on the following day.

In the meantime, in the little chamber which is known as the tower at the Farmery, Thersa lay awake tossing restlessly on her little truckle bed. "I shall see him to-morrow," she whispered to herself, "but he will never think of me. Ah! how beautiful he is!" and she said "Launcelot" softly to herself. "He is so brave and so strong. I remember in the early spring when the red cow ran after me how he jumped over the fence and saved me, and when I thanked him he only laughed and bid me not think of it twice. Ah! if I had only fine clothes like Bell Milner how happy I should be; but I must not covet other folks' finery, for I have only my old green chintz and a clean mob-cap. How I should like to be gay and smart for his sake! but he cannot care for me. I am very humble for I haven't even a silver pin, and Launcelot is rich for he has inherited all old Farmer Jackson's farm and money"; and so musing Thersa fell asleep till cock-crow when she leapt out of bed and dressed herself quickly, putting on a smock over her skirts and a sunbonnet on her head.

Then she caught up a milking-stool and a pail, and ran out to milk Clover, Daphne, Damson and Ramsenblow as they grazed in the rich

THE HOLY WELL

meadow. As she milked she sang an old song once well known in Shropshire :

“ My own dear love, he came to me,”

so ran the refrain ; and over and over again she repeated the simple ditty.

The patient kine stood quietly in the grass, and Thersa milked her four in turn, whilst the maids of the farm proceeded to milk the others.

The herbage lay heavy with dew, and shone gold with brilliant buttercups. All was very still, save for the songs of the throstles and blackbirds which sang, and piped, in the abbey garden near the Farmery.

Suddenly across the field appeared a lithe young figure clad in russet clothing. The newcomer whistled a merry tune as he trod the meadow. “ What, up so early ? ” he cried as he espied Thersa. “ I had not thought to find you up so early, lass,” he said, “ but ‘tis a merry maid that milks at dawn, as the old saying runs.”

Thersa blushed rosy red and stopped milking. “ ‘Tis a good cow our Ramsenblow,” she replied with pride, “ and her flow of milk delights my heart and cousin’s too.”

“ Art not tired, rising so early ? ” asked Launcelot.

“ She’s not worth hiring who talks of tiring,” laughed Thersa. “ I needs must be up when the

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

missus stirs at cock-crow. We bain't no lazy pack of servants here like they be at Squire Haley's, where the servant-wenches drink Bohea and madam's waiting-woman gives herself more airs, and makes more grimaces than madam herself. Up with the lark, and your money will breed in your pocket, they say."

"Aye, lass," said Launcelot gravely, "that it will, for so no physic will be needed. No city madam would have megrims, I think, if she went out like thee when dew is on the grass"; and then Launcelot stood by Thersa and listened to the rhythmic swish of the rich milk falling into the pail, and watched the patient stamping of the cow, who seemed at regular intervals to keep time with her feet whilst the drip, drip of the milking continued.

"What does her give?" inquired Launcelot.

"Twelve quarts if a drop mornings, and her calf Eyebright will be as good, come two years," replied Thersa.

Together the two young people carried in the pails, and as they did so, Launcelot spoke of the *fête* that was to follow later on in the day.

"I shall look for thee, lass," he said as he put both pails in the dairy. "Sure none will look as dainty as thee."

"I've naught but an old smock," said the maid sorrowfully, "so it is not bravely that thou wilt

THE HOLY WELL

see me dressed, and as for a pin I have naught but an old and crooked one. There will be many finer maids," she added. "There will be Bell Milner and Florrie Davies."

To this Launcelot made no answer, but stood and looked at Thersa tenderly, and went off whistling softly, and a moment later Thersa ran off and told her mistress "that Farmer Shingler had already come, and as to the milk," she added, "'tis all according to custom in the dairy."

"Sure thou art a good lass," said Mistress Wycherley smiling, "and now," she added, "get thee to thy chamber. All the winter and spring thou hast milked and churned, scrubbed and cleaned, and good work deserves good pay. Therefore, for all Bell shall be bravely clad, thou, too, my lass, shalt have no cause of complaint. Thou shalt have a pretty smock and a tasty headgear. I have placed all on thy bed."

"Dear mistress, how can I thank thee," and Thersa's eyes swam with grateful tears, and a second later she rushed upstairs breathless, and too joyful to speak.

There lay upon the bed a beautiful sacque of pale blue muslin with opal-tinted bows and fluttering ribbons, a black silk apron, a lace cap with knots of taffeta, blue shoes and silver buckles, and a dove shot-silk pelisse.

By the bed, standing in a gallipot of water, lay

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

a bodice-knot of Mistress Wycherley's gayest hen-and-chicken daisies. Thersa kissed the flowers reverently. "I thank God," she said, "that I possess so dear and kind a friend," and a moment later she had slipped off her smock of duck, and plunged her face and hands into a ewer of cold water, and after a few moments of cooling and cleansing was busily engaged in putting on all her bravery.

Outside, four pictures from the four little lattice windows presented themselves to Thersa's gaze. From the east window she saw far away over the meadows the mists still lying on the grass, and the cattle grazing drowsily in the foreground. To the west rose the spire of the parish church, and she discerned Farmer Wycherley, and old Cuthbert Codgers pacing up the neat pathway that lay between the budding espaliers and the lilac-bushes of the little square, red-walled garden. Then she peeped to the south, and saw Launcelot seated, apparently waiting for the arrival of some one. A few minutes later and she heard the heavy oak door of the Farmery open, and saw Madam Milner and Bell enter the garden. Almost simultaneously she saw Launcelot get up and bow, and noticed that Bell, following the habit of the gentry, swept him a stately curtsey. She thought also, she heard her rival give a sly laugh. Poor little Thersa, her eyes became

THE HOLY WELL

riveted on the scene outside. Her heart sank when she noted Bell's fine colour and flashing eyes, and noticed how comely she looked in her new attire, and Thersa recollect ed that besides a pretty face Bell had also a goodly fortune.

"Why should he look at me," she sobbed. "I am only a poor little grey bird in comparison, good for homely things alone," and all the glory of her mistress' kind gifts faded from her vision. Then she turned to the little northern window and murmured, "My crooked pin will be of no service, for it has to fight a gold one."

A minute afterwards and her master's cheery voice resounded through the house from outside. "Come down, Thersa," he cried, "and let's see thee in all thy gauds and finery"; and at this, poor little Thersa's spirits revived, for truly there is great salvation to be found for a young lass in new and pretty clothes, and so, wiping away a tear, she hurried away, ran down the rickety stairs at break-neck speed, and dashed into the garden.

Thersa was a pretty sight as she stood amongst the flowers. Her pale blue sacque and petticoat became her well, and the knot of daisies waved upon her breast, whilst in her eyes there shone an expectant light.

"Our little lass looks gay as May morning," said kind Farmer Wycherley; and he added,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"What has thou done to make thyself so bobbish, lass?"

Even old Cuthbert looked up and growled "that there war somethin' in clothes, when folks knew how to put them on, and that a pretty frock to a maid, was like sunshine to a field of corn."

As to Launcelot, he looked and looked, and his handsome face became crimson with pleasure.

Madam Milner, noting his undisguised admiration, coughed sulkily. "Kitchen-wenches clothe themselves like city madams," she whispered to her daughter. "A girl that does scullion's work should walk in grey or brown, say I."

"We none of us are born scullions," said Farmer Wycherley, who had overheard his guest's remark. "There bain't a breed for cleaning, and for all that, the little maid can clean a garnish of pewter, spin fine homespun, and milk with any. She's a bonny maid. Sunshine bain't all for the rich. It warms the poor man's back besides my lady's coach."

After breakfast and subsequent to much ringing of bells, the party from the Farmery repaired to the old grey parish church of Much Wenlock.

When the service was ended, Master Cyril, as Mistress Wycherley called him, led a procession of youths round the town. They were, according to old custom, nearly all clad in smocks and many of them bore posies of lilac, oxlip, old man, honesty,

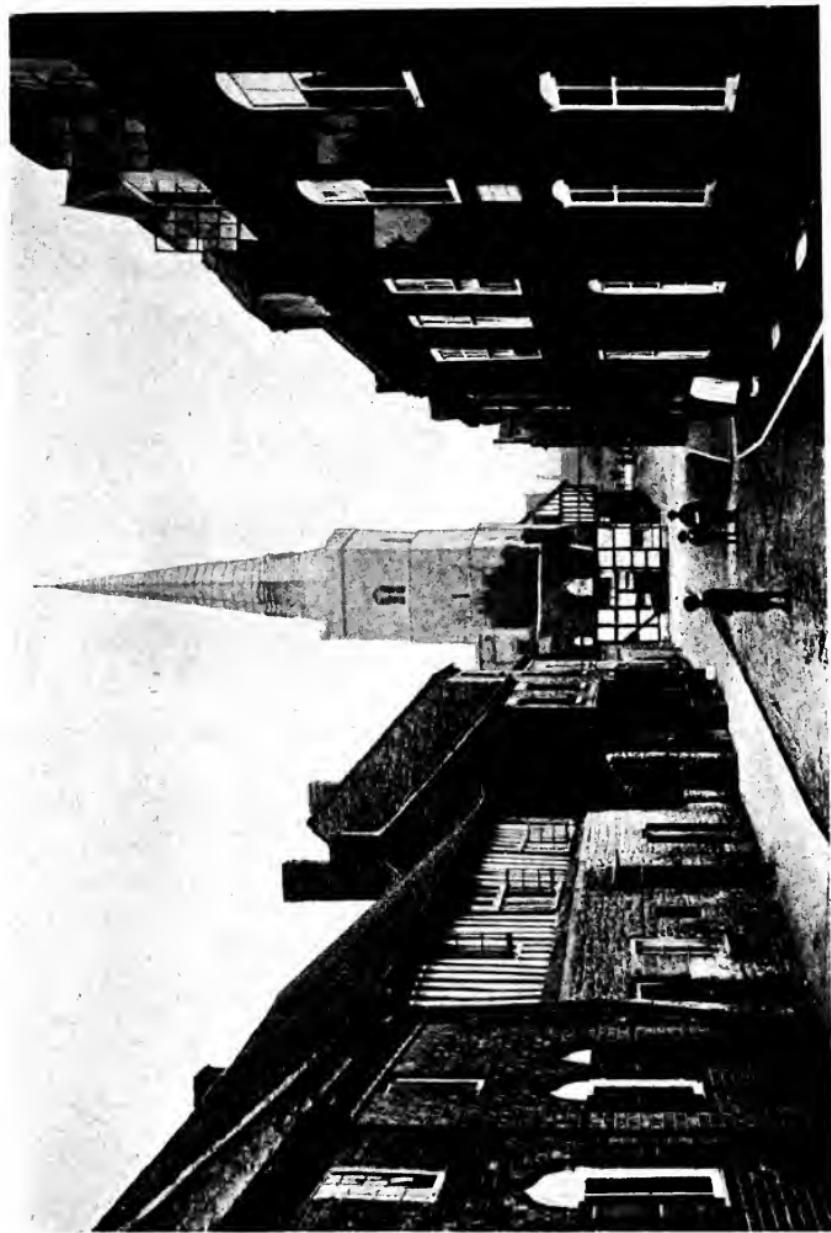


Photo by Valentine.

SHERNTON STREET, MUCH WENLOCK.

THE HOLY WELL

and bunches of cheorls as large button-holes. In their hands they bore green boughs of beech, oak, birch, and fir, cut from the Edge Wood and Mog Forest.

It was a pretty sight ; the fiddlers scraped their fiddles, Caleb and Daniel Deakin tootled on their flutes, and old Noah Rowe beat time upon his drum, the same, it was said, as he had done years before in the foreign wars. All the people walked round the town, up Hospital Street, round by the goodly black-and-white Guild Hall, by St. Owen's Well, ending by Sheinton Street, Barrow Street, and so to St. Milburga's Well.

Then the good folk seated themselves as best they might on the grass and the men called for strong ale, which Farmer Wycherley provided, and the women drank cups of sugar and water, and some had egg-cups full of honey. And all the villagers and country folk sat and refreshed themselves, whilst the maidens, according to old custom, stood forth and sang the songs of old Shropshire, such as "Daisies Nine," "The Lord He breathes through Verdant Green," "Up in a far Hill where Throstles pipe," "The Game of Death," and "Joy, his Song is Sweet." It was sweet and fair listening to the young fresh voices which one after the other sang the well-known words, and all joined in the familiar choruses.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"Come, lass," cried Mistress Wycherley at last to Thersa, "thou hast a voice pretty as any storm-cock's (missel-thrush). Pipe up a ditty, it is thy turn."

Then Thersa blushed scarlet, but on her cousin pressing her to sing, she got up and sang "There is a World my Heart doth know." Thersa had a singularly sweet voice, and sang with feeling. All listened, and owing to the natural charm of her voice, were moved. Even old Cuthbert wiped his eye furtively against his sleeve, and vowed "it beat cock-fighting easy," and as to honest Lawrence Wycherley, he called out, "Well done, lass; thee puts a lump in my throat."

Then Launcelot Shingler got up from his seat and came towards Thersa and begged her to sing again. After a little hesitation she complied, and sang the well-known old cavalier song of "Joy is Sweet," composed, it is said, by one Rupert Mildmay, a cousin of the Pendrils, in honour of his Majesty's glorious restoration in 1660.

Ah! joy, too, was sweet to little Thersa, for as she stole shy glances at Launcelot she saw only admiration and love in his handsome face, as he led her back to her place by Madam Wycherley's side before all the villagers.

"Thee hast sung bravely, little mistress," he murmured in her ear. "'Tis a lovely thing in woman, a sweet voice," and they sat down

THE HOLY WELL

on the greensward and their words came in whispers.

At last Bell jumped up with a red face, and vowed it was time for the pin-throwing to begin, and she walked towards the well, followed by her mother.

“Patience, lass,” said Madam Milner in an undertone, “’tis little use to show thy hand clear as daylight.”

At the same moment old Cuthbert, following Bell with his eyes, cried out mischievously, “Our Sal swaggers like Mistress Wycherley’s turkey when she’s laid an egg.”

At this speech a titter ran round the assembled spectators.

Bell fairly blazed with wrath as she threw in her silver pin, and afterwards in high dudgeon plumped down upon the grass.

“Money canna buy everythin’; there be sky, air, sun, and love, that no purse be long enough to pay for,” and old Cuthbert set up an ill-natured chuckle.

Then one after the other the lasses in turn rose and threw their pins into the well, whilst the swains held back, and laughed sheepishly.

During this time seven fiddles scraped and big Tom Trowler, the blacksmith, roared forth: “Wish at the Holy Well and kiss.”

At last Thersa plucked up heart, advanced and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

threw the old pin she had carried with her. Bent, and crooked it was, but for all that old Cuthbert cried out, “ ‘Twill do thy job, lass,” and fell a-laughing, as if he had grown young again. Thersa threw her pin, and as she turned to regain her place, she saw to her joy that Launcelot had walked to meet her, and that he was prepared to lead her back.

“Our puss,” muttered old Codgers, “darn’t face the music. Lie under the bed and catch some mice,” he snarled, and glanced at Bell and her mother.

Bell heard what he said but took no heed. She turned aside, but Madam Milner was too angry to refrain from speaking, and burst forth with: “Sure ‘tis a pity to see beggars prancing like the Quality on horseback,” and declared that all folks knew, that love where the lass weren’t fit for the lad meant disaster and shame. Then growing excited she pointed rudely at Thersa and called out, “Such carryin’s-on fills me, a mother, with disgust.”

But Thersa heard nothing. Love, I have often noticed, serves as a protecting veil to its votaries, and, happy as a maiden only is who has her heart’s desire, Thersa wandered off with Launcelot to the old walnut-tree which stands beside the Abbey Farm, and there her faithful swain told her of his love.



THE HOLY WELL.

THE
HOLY WELL



THE HOLY WELL

"Thee must marry me, my dear," he said. "Since I have known thee, I have really known what love can be, not fancy flummery, but the real thing. I know, dear, thou art as good as thou art fair, helpful, and a good housewife, and withal sweet and tender, and thy voice, dear, will hold me by heavenly cords."

Then Thersa blushed like a red June rose. "Thou art mocking me," she said softly. "For, oh! Launcelot, thou art a fine gentleman with land of thine own and fine buildings, and I am poor without dower or portion. I am naught but a penniless wench."

But Launcelot would not allow Thersa so to speak of herself. "Thou art all the world to me, my dear," he said, "and I am proud of thee for all thy woman's ways, and dainty manners, and we will marry, and live right happily together, if thou wilt but say the word. If thou hast no fortune what matters it? I have enough for two. Come, lass," he continued, "let us plight our troth," and under the bronze-tinted green of the walnut the two embraced tenderly.

"Thou wilt find me stout and true," said Launcelot, and Thersa blushed with joy, and happy April tears overflowed the dark depths of her eyes as she whispered, "Say, the old pin did as well as a brand-new one," and then they fell a-laughing, and afterwards Launcelot led her back

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

to the rest of the villagers, who had already begun to dance in the meadow.

In the words of Mistress Wycherley, “Merrily passed the afternoon. No cloud or thunderstorm spoilt the sport, but gracious sunlight fell on all, until the twilight and after that the moon shone forth. And as to the dancers, they skipped and they pranced, pousetted and chassied, curtsied and bowed, till the old clock struck the hour of ten.”

Then over the fields and out of the little inn yards, by coaches and carts and in open waggons, the country folks vanished singing and laughing.

As he stood watching the retreating figures Lawrence spoke thus to his wife: “Therzy’s pin done right enough.”

“That there crook be as straight as a die for all it war wanted,” said old Cuthbert, who was standing by. “I bain’t a marryin’ man,” he continued, “for marriage I hold to be a folly, but if a man must wed, let him take a wench as can cook, brew, and spin. A grasshopper be bosome enough in summer, but there be little chirp once the frost come in, and a girl like Bell will hop and crow afore marriage, but weep and vapour once the service be read. Marriage,” he added severely, “be a death-douch to butterfly maids, but to honest arms, and workin’ hands, it brings vigour, enterprise, and a new life.”

A WREATH OF ROSES

SIR WILLIAM DUGDALE, in his account of Tong Church, wrote in 1663: "There is a fair tomb of alabaster whereon do lie the figures of a man in armour and of his wife. This is said to be the monument of Sir Fowke Pembrugge, Knight. sometime Lord of Tong, and of his lady, Isabella."

On this tomb it was the custom, up till the middle of the nineteenth century, to lay garlands of roses on the nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24). This usage had arisen from the fact that when Roger la Zouche enfeoffed Henry de Hugford in lands at Tong the only acknowledgement reserved was a chaplet of roses payable to the grantor." Later on this pretty custom took the form of a village celebration every year, the fairest maiden of the neighbourhoood being selected to lay a garland of roses on the tomb at the close of the service, and for the fête to wind up with a merry dance on the green.

One early year of the nineteenth century, Mary Marlowe, the daughter of Farmer Marlowe and of Orabil his wife, was chosen for this duty.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Mary was tall, and a singularly refined-looking girl with light blue eyes, a straight line of features, a very slender throat and soft brown hair. She was dressed all in white and bore in her hands a wreath of white roses.

She was followed closely by her companions, Mistresses Letty and Carrie, and pretty Dolly, and Nancy Hill. The last two gay country lasses had cheeks that flamed like summer apples. They were clad either in red or blue, with bodice and skirt to match. Each girl bore in one hand a staff decorated with flowers, and knots of ribbon, and in the other a posy. Some carried tied to the crook of their stick roses, and southernwood, others, pansies and mignonette, marigolds and lychnis, and on one was a bunch of crimson peonies with tufts of lupin and sweet-scented pinks.

"'Tis a purty sight," said old Silas Jenks, the old clerk, who sported a brilliant waistcoat, embroidered with flowers. "For sure the maidens be as purty as the flowers themselves."

When all were seated, Parson Thomas, the old vicar, read a few prayers, and then all joined and sang a psalm to the sound of violins and a flute. Later on the doctor, as he was called, mounted the pulpit and gave an hour's discourse on flowers and fruit, mixed with many long notes and learned quotations upon Jewish habits and mediæval

A WREATH OF ROSES

customs, and ended by giving a long dissertation upon the flora and fauna of Palestine. It was an acknowledged fact in the parish that the learned doctor had three ready-made discourses which he kept for these festive occasions. These he regularly read in succession. Nobody at Tong wished for anything more, or criticised the fact that the doctor had only three sermons, and that these followed each other at regular intervals.

"It was good larning, sure enough," the inhabitants said, and the old doctor had a good voice and delivery, and they all understood bits here and there. "There war no need to understand all old Becky Johnson said, or else how did the blessed mystery come in? It war only among nondescripts as folks wished to comprehend what they prayed for."

After the sermon the vicar gave his benediction, and a few minutes later Mary got up, and followed by her maidens and a party of young men in smocks, walked down to the Golden Chapel, and laid her chaplet of flowers at the feet of the Lady Isabella.

The violins and a flute struck up, and the scent of the flowers filled the church with sweetness.

As Mary walked down the church she thought of the same festival five years ago, and all that had taken place since then. She remembered how she had met her lover, Orlando Morland,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

outside the old church door, and how they had wandered home together across the fields. She recollects how he had told her that he loved her, and how she had reproached him for the wild life that he led, and refused to marry him on account of it.

"Thou'l break my heart, lass!" he had retorted in a passion, to which she had replied, "'Tis better to break it now, than that we two should marry and be miserable ever after. Dost think, Orlando, that I will have a drunkard, who thinks of naught but his cups, and a man like thee, who is given up to riotous livin'," and Mary left him with a white face but a firm step. Then she remembered how Orlando had called after her, "Thee wilt drive me to it!" and that he had turned away with a scowl, and vaulted over a stile in the opposite direction.

The day, our story begins, it had rained all through the preceding night, sweet, gentle summer rain, and all nature lay glistening in the perfect glory of a June day. Soft white fleecy clouds floated across the sky, and the grass, fresh and green, was powdered with a mist of daisies. Curly lambs lay peacefully beside their dams between the gravestones enjoying the genial warmth after the wet of the night.

Mary stood aside and watched her companions pass out of the church. "I will follow," she

A WREATH OF ROSES

whispered to Dolly, "a bit later, but I cannot stay at the dance long, for mother's but sadly, and when I have seen Peggy's grave I'll soon get back to her. For there are the onions to chop for the young turkeys, and father's beefsteak to cook, and the calves to see to at sunset, so it's little dancing that I'll have."

Mary stood still in the shade of the porch looking as one in a dream at the fair sights around her. In the distance she saw the towers of Tong Castle, and a little way off in the park the high-standing dove-cot of the seventeenth century.

It was a lovely, peaceful world, but somehow Mary felt sad at heart. She recalled her words with Orlando, and repented that in the past she had spoken to him so harshly. She had since discovered that the stories, she had heard told of him, had been much exaggerated, and now realised that they had been circulated largely owing to the personal spite of a neighbour. It was quite true that Orlando had been wild, but the story about the other woman, Mary had discovered to be quite untrue; and as to her lover getting drunk at the Blue Boar, the worst had been made and emphasised in recounting the foolish frolic.

Orlando had been guilty of taking part in a pot-house brawl, but had not been more to blame than

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

his comrades. It was true he had broken a score of glasses, and several panes of glass, and had followed the inn-keeper with the tongs, vowing that he would treat him like St. Dunstan did the Devil, but he was not alone in this folly, and in thinking the matter over Mary forgot her anger, and remembered only the old friendship they had had for each other when she and Orlando had been happy playmates. She recollects how they had wandered over the waste fields in search of plovers' eggs, or walked by the streams, hunting for early primroses, and wild wood-anemones; or had plucked the marsh-marigold to deck the maypole.

These were pretty memories, and Mary's blue eyes filled with tears as she thought of all the dangers and hardships that Orlando must have gone through since she last saw him; for he had enlisted the day after their meeting, and soon after had joined a regiment which had sailed for Portugal, and there marched on with a portion of the British Army which was then engaged in fighting the French in Spain. Once she had heard through a mutual friend, that Orlando had written to his mother, Mistress Morland of the Downs Farm, a letter giving an account of the battle of Talavera, but no news had reached her for some time, as a coldness had sprung up between the two families, and the Morlands, especially old Job

A WREATH OF ROSES

Morland, resented keenly Mary's rejection of his son.

"If it hadn't a-been for the wench," he told his gossips, "the lad wud have a-settled down peaceable and comfortable. A bit wild—well, there's few as hasn't got to sow their wild oats, and wild oats in human natur' can turn into good red wheat, if you'll let 'em bide a bit. We wasn't all born bishops as her 'ull find. Give me a young colt as has got a bit more mettle than yer can hold at first in a halter. He'll come to and make the best nag in the cart yet. A bit of rampageousness in youth often means the fine goer in man and beast when the wisdom-teeth come."

As Mary mused over the past, she suddenly became aware of footsteps behind her. "Is that thee, Master Silas?" she said without looking up, for she thought it must be the old clerk in his double capacity of sexton and clerk who had come to lock up the church gate.

"Nay, Mary, it's not the clerk," and the maiden looked up to behold her former lover.

Orlando was very pale, and carried his right arm in a sling, and walked but haltingly. Mary looked at him, and with a cry of joy seized the hand that was free.

"I thought I had come in time, dear," he said, "to see thee in thy glory place the garland of roses, but I be late. A lame man cannot walk

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

his old pace. But glad I be to be at home again."

Orlando was very thin, and looked pinched and worn, and all his jovial devil-may-care manner, which had made him be known in old days as "dashing Orlando," was gone.

As Mary gazed at him a lump rose in her throat. "I did not know," she answered, "that thou wert back. I thought that thou wert still out fighting the French in Spain."

"And so I was till a few weeks ago," he replied; "but I caught the fever and got a knock or two that has left me useless, for I cannot now, lass, get over the hills after the French. I fought," he continued, "at Talavera, at Fuentes d'Onore, and at Badajoz, and," he added with a laugh, "our victories were not won with rose-water."

"Art glad to get back?" inquired Mary, and she went and sat on a green mound, where Orlando followed her, and sat beside her.

"Glad? Oh, lass! thee dost not know what it is to be away for years. The fightin's well enough—every Shropshire lad would like that—but the day after the battle, whichever side wins, must be a sad one. There be many good friends gone, however great the victory; and after a while 'tis tired you get of thirst and hunger, and of hearing a foreigneerin' tongue talked, and of marchin', allus marchin'. 'Tis your mother tongue you

A WREATH OF ROSES

crave for, and the old places, and, best of all, the old faces—that's what a lad wants. Didst ever think on me? We parted rough, for I wasn't worthy of thee, and now I've come back only the hulk of the man I was—a poor pitiful fellow—lame as my mother's old white donkey; and I fear it will be long before I can do much with the right arm. A musket-ball at Badajoz pretty nearly broke it. War is a fine thing, Mary, for the commander and the officers, but the glory soon goes for the poor thirstin', strugglin', toilin' privates when they've been out a bit—they carry the burden and get the kicks, whilst others pocket the praise."

Then Mary broke out impetuously: "Dear Orlando, don't be so mournful, for I'm sure you're the light of your old mother's eyes and the pride of your father's heart."

But Orlando shook his head. "That's an old story, dear," he said. "Ned now takes my place. He's the handy lad—a cripple isn't worth much. They war kindly 'cause they be Shropshire born; but my place be gone—filled up—and I doesn't count, so I feels lonely and out of life."

Then Mary laid her hand on his. "Orlando," she said softly, "perhaps I was a bit to blame, a bit sharp like to thee, for what one hears often, sticks after a while, and that day I spoke in anger; but all these years I have never thought

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

of any one else. We knew each other since we was children."

"Yes, yes," cried Orlando eagerly. "We bird-nested, we climbed trees as little 'uns, we made flower-wreaths, and stole my father's apples, and many was the time we got into mischief together. There be nothin' like old companionship ; it be, so to speak, the anchor of two hearts."

Then Mary laughed gently, and they recalled the exploits of the old days. Suddenly a mist rose before her eyes for she realised how weak he was, and how heavily he leant upon his stick.

"Thee looks bravely, Mary," said Orlando with a glance of admiration. "A queen !—thou hast grown into a fair woman that I left a slip of a lass. Thou hast grown as beautiful and stately, as any lady that appears before the king at Windsor."

Then Mary smiled, for the undisguised admiration of Orlando was sweet to her.

"Let us come into the church," she murmured, "and rest ; the sun is hot and thou art faint, poor lad."

So the two passed into the shadow of the stately church. They walked down the aisle in silence and sat down in a square, old-fashioned pew that faced Sir Thomas Stanley's monument.

"This be the old place," said Orlando in a voice of contentment, "where I have so often sat

A WREATH OF ROSES

before, for I would, if I could, allus slip away from our pew and share it with thee if so might be. And here us used to sit whilst Parson Thomas preached. I used to long then, when I war a boy, for roving and roaming, and thought as how I'd do fine things when I wud come to be a man. Of how I'd win the battles, save the flag, and win the king's thanks. It war mighty fine but all moonshine or summer fancy, and all my imaginings be gone since I have fought a battle or two under Sir Arthur. They be heavy jobs be real battles—deal of dirt, deal of dyin', and no time for fine speeches, as they makes in the London play-houses. Glory don't last through the night, but thirst and hunger can last summer and winter. But a fellow knows that you've got to do it, 'cause *you must*, and 'cause it wud be a shame not to lick the Froggies and not to show them as Old Nosey is every bit as good as their Boney."

"Perhaps that is glory," said Mary in a hushed voice.

"Perhaps it is," assented Orlando, "but 'tis glory with all the high-falutin' left out, and naught remainin' save that Shropshire lads won't take knocks without givin' as good. But oh! lass, thee can't know what a blessed thing it is, not to hear no guns a-goin' off, and to be able to talk quiet, and to feel cocksure and restful, as there be none behind a hedge, as wull make

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

a target of yer afore thou canst say ‘Jack Robinson.’”

“ Yet there be somethin’ in glory, Orlando,” replied Mary, “ put it as thou wilt, dear. We women do not fight, but we know how to honour the right metal in a man more than anything else.” And as she spoke Mary’s gaze fell upon Shakespeare’s immortal lines.

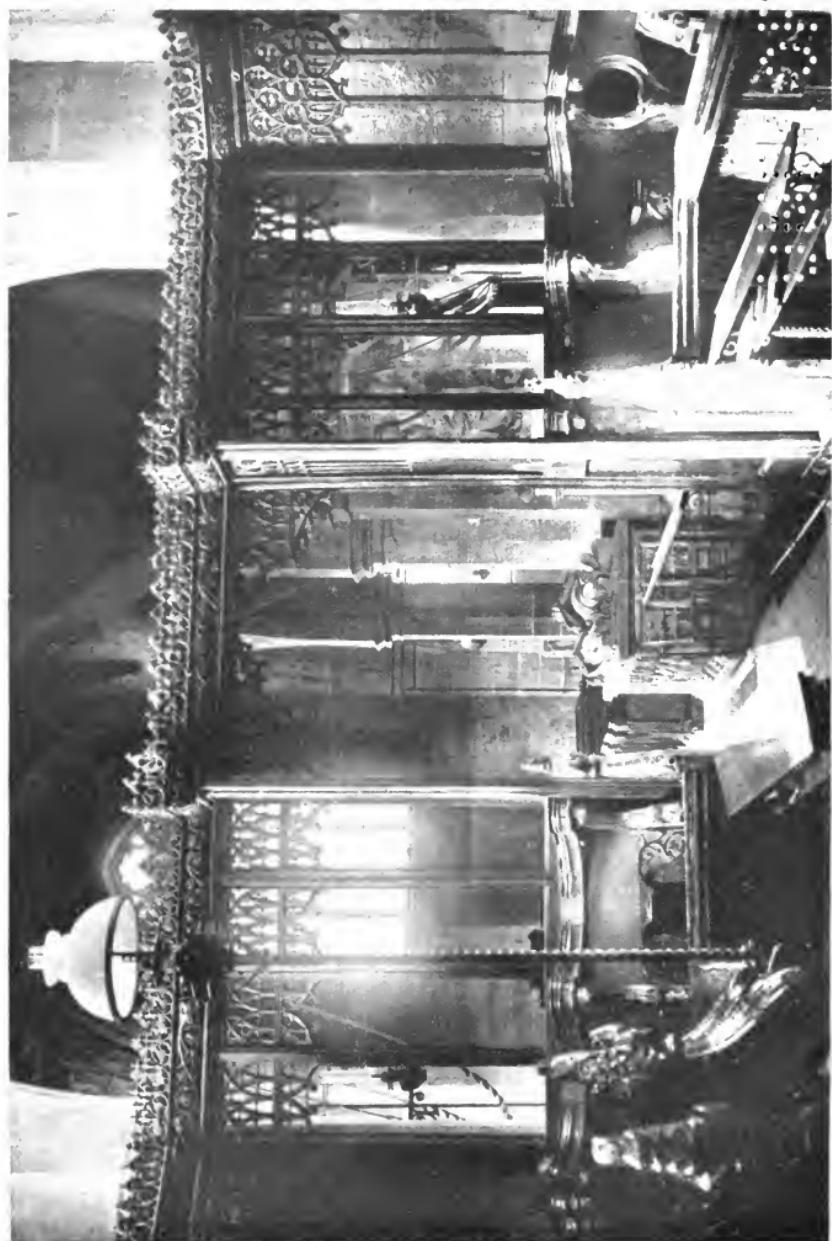
“ Say ‘em to me,” said Orlando, following her eyes.

So Mary read aloud :

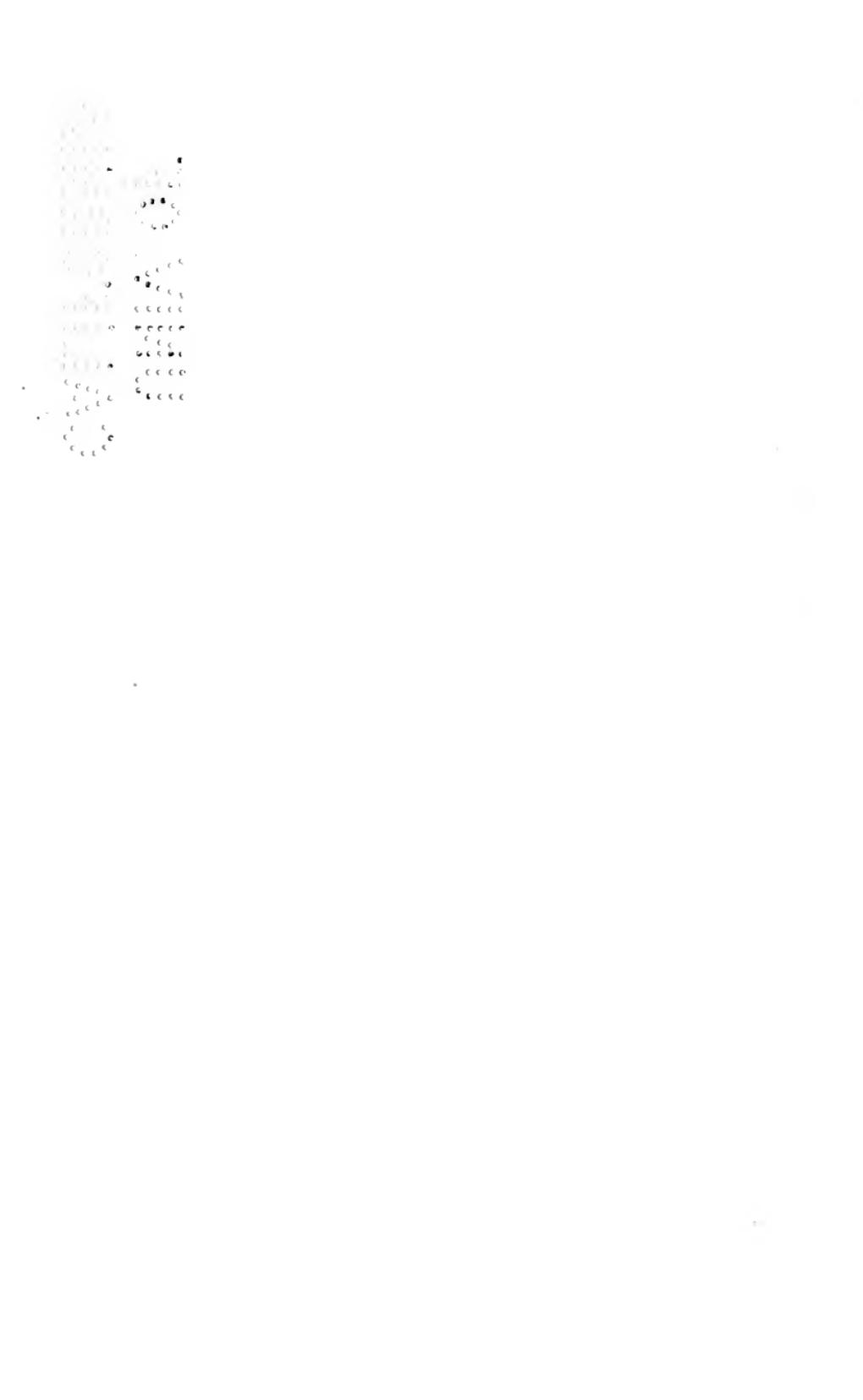
“ Not monumental stone preserves our fame,
Nor sky-aspiring pyramids our name.
The memory of him for whom this stands
Shall outlive marble and defacers’ hands.
When all to Time’s consumption shall be given,
Stanley, for whom this stands, shall stand in heaven.”

“ Yes ! he’s right,” cried Orlando, “ for all he war a poet,” and a burst of enthusiasm lit up his pale face. “ There’s somethin’ in dyin’ for a cause even if yer be but a poor lad. There be honour for all, but she’s a heavy burden for a private to carry, and those as works best in her cause oftentimes talks least.”

“ Honour’s rewards are not always men’s,” and Mary spoke very gently, and a beautiful tenderness broke across her face, and her eyes lighted up with a strange glory and the two young people knelt and prayed awhile.



TONG CHURCH.



A WREATH OF ROSES

A few minutes later they rose from their knees and left the old church. As they wandered home across the rich English fields, they turned for a moment, and paused to look back at the spire.

"One doesn't know till one's fought and suffered what a privilege it is, lass, for a man to pray beside the girl he loves," said Orlando.

"Nor can a man tell," said Mary tenderly, "how happy a lass is to have the dear face she loves best in the world with her once more. It's like summer after winter."

And so the two wandered home together.

"Mother," said Mary, on reaching her father's farm, "Orlando has come back, and come to stay, thank God."

THE RETURN OF JOY

“It is a dull and cloudy evening,” Claire Corbet said to her cousin, Rachel Mytton, as she looked out of the old mullion windows at Shipton Hall.

The speaker was very tall, slender, and graceful, with an exquisite creamy complexion and blue eyes that shone like sapphires. She was dressed in the deepest mourning. She spoke gently and slowly for one still so young, and there was a sense of abiding sorrow in all her gestures and motions when she thought herself unobserved. The two ladies sat in the oak parlour at Shipton one damp day early in November in the dying years of the eighteenth century.

Madam Mytton, as was her wont, was busily occupied in knitting. She was a little middle-aged woman, and was clad in a pearl-grey brocade, with her hair powdered over a cushion. Dainty Mechlin lace appeared round her neck and at her wrists, and she still wore high heels and sparkling shoe-buckles.

“It is a cheerless day,” she agreed, “but I

THE RETURN OF JOY

think not that the people of the country-side will pay much heed to the weather. A little amusement, or an old festival and they run to the old Hall like a flock of sheep to fresh pastures. Jack and Jill will go many miles for a cake, a song, and an apple."

"Ah! cousin," said Claire, "you and Robert are much beloved. The people come to see you, for you and he have ever been the protectors of the poor."

"Yes, my dear," answered Madam Mytton with a sly smile, "they have always been attached to us, but good cheer goes far in an outing. But it is well," she added after a pause, "that the poor should have their pleasures as well as the rich. They ditch, dig, sow and reap for us the whole year round, so I have begged my maids and Mistress Ffilley to pile seven great baskets of cakes that all mouths, big and small, may be filled to-night. The country folk will come from Bourton, Weston, from Larden, Brocton, Easthope, and Munslow, and, perhaps, some even will walk all the way from Callaughton—even from Much Wenlock. It is well to observe old customs. Behind the laughter there often lies a deeper meaning."

"Ah! cousin, to whom do you say that?" said Claire. "All Souls Day means much to me. To feel a little nearer—however little—to my dear

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

loved ones is always a step—a step, perhaps, nearer God."

"Poor child!" said Madam Mytton compassionately. "Does your grief, then, never grow less poignant? God knows how my heart bled for you when we heard the news at Walcote! I never heard all the details of Roland's death, but I was told the general of his division wrote you a beautiful letter, in which he said that your husband died like a hero, and that he was proud to have known him."

"Roland died as he had lived—like a noble English gentleman!" and for a moment the young widow's voice trembled with pride; then she went on very quietly: "You must know it was in the woods of Vicoigne in '93 that Roland met his death, almost in the first shot that was fired between French and English. The British were sent forward to reinforce the Prussians. The command to attack was given and our men advanced cheering, when suddenly the Republicans sprang up from an ambush and appeared in overwhelming numbers. For an instant a panic spread amongst our lines. Many of our men were quite boys and raw recruits, and thus suddenly and unexpectedly encountering a hail of bullets they took fright and fled precipitately. At the same moment the young ensign who bore the standard was shot down, and the standard fell

THE RETURN OF JOY

to the ground. My husband tried to rally his men. ‘The standard must be saved at all costs !’ he cried, and he got off his horse, and picked it up. He then tried to mount his horse again, but the animal was so alarmed by the waving of the flag that he became uncontrollable, and, breaking his rein, escaped, so Roland remained in the open alone with the standard. Then the French came on with a yell, singing furiously ‘*Ça ira*,’ and in a minute Roland fell, covered with wounds.”

For a moment Claire’s voice broke. After a pause she went on: “The English with a superior force took the position later. When they did so, they discovered my dear one lying near the flag with a smile on his face. Then they bore him sadly back to the camp, and found on him the last letter I had written, and a little blue locket that I had given him the day we pledged our faith to each other.”

“Yes, dear,” said Madam Mytton, “the letter that you showed me when I was last your guest at Brunton ?”

“The same ; that I still have, but the locket is gone,” said Claire.

“How did that happen ?” inquired Madam Mytton.

“Well,” continued Claire, “perhaps it was foolish, but I had a sort of belief that somehow it would be a protection to my child, so ever since

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

she was quite a baby little Mooney wore it by a ribbon round her neck, underneath her dress. It was of little value, but it was given to me by my dear father the day he died from a fall out hunting ; and I loved it, for when I looked at it, it seemed to come from the two hands that I had loved best in the world. For this reason I put it round my little daughter's neck as a sort of holy charm, and now it has gone, and she has gone, and I have lost all—all."

As she spoke Claire covered her face with her hands, and wept passionately. She looked very pathetic, this young widow, so youthful in years, and yet who had drunk so deeply of the cup of sorrow.

"Child, it is the will of God!" and Madam Mytton gravely laid her hand upon Claire's shoulder.

"I know it, dear," replied the other humbly, "but I cannot always feel it so—I lost him and then I thought my heart would break, and yet I lived. Some months later there came the child, and I felt as one who has lived amongst snow-clad mountains might feel when he leaves a white dead world and sees once more the sunshine and the flowers. She was all to me was Mooney, not too good for daily fun or laughter, with her great grey eyes and bewitching smile. She could dance at three, repeat also then little rhymes

THE RETURN OF JOY

and verses, and was the soul of gaiety. She had a hundred little droll words and gestures that recalled my dear one in his merriest moments. She was the brightest of little madcaps, like a little elf and full of mischief. Madam Mordaunt vowed that she would make her die of laughing, and as for the general he would come and bow to her as low as to the Queen, whilst Mooney would dance to him or pull out his sword, and declare that she would marry him when she grew as tall as his cane, and call him ‘her own dear boy.’ Ah! hers were pretty innocent wiles,” and the mother’s eyes glistened with tears.

“Yes, dear,” said Madam Mytton sympathetically, “but tell me how you lost her.”

“I have told you, cousin, so often that I fear to weary you.”

“Nay, coz, talk on,” replied the elder woman, “for I think it eases your heart even though it leaves your eyes wet with tears.”

“Thank you, dear,” replied Claire, “it is very good to know that kind friends can go on caring and not grow weary. Well, you know our red brick house in Kensington, not far from the palace with the green shutters and stone facings. It was there that I lost her. It was a lovely day in May two years ago. The lilacs were all in blossom, and on one of our apple-trees there piped a thrush. All through the morning he sang

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

and sang. Mooney heard him from her nursery window, and entreated me to go out with her and let her watch him nearer. The moment, however, we got into the garden she dropped my hand and began to frolic wildly amongst the daisies on the lawn. What possessed the child I know not, but she began to pirouette and turn round like any little fairy, and to sing in her clear elfish voice rhyme after rhyme, and distich after distich, until the thrush at last took fright, and flew away. Then Mooney fell a-laughing and I bade her keep quiet, for I feared that she would make herself ill by too much excitement and laughter, but the child would not pay attention to what I said. ‘Mum mum,’ she cried, and danced and sang like a real actress. Then through the garden gates there entered a dark and evil-looking man and an old crone. The man was swarthy and tall, and never have I seen a fellow of such evil countenance. Mooney at his approach ceased laughing and clung to my skirts in terror.

“‘Take me away, mum mum,’ she cried. ‘The bird has flown, and I will go also.’

“I asked the strange pair their business. They told me they sold baskets, told fortunes, and the man offered me a bird in a cage for sale. The better to stop their importunities I complied with his request and bought the bird ; but all the while I noticed that his eyes were riveted on my child, and

THE RETURN OF JOY

once he whispered something that I did not understand to the old crone in a foreign tongue. Upon this she laughed. After receiving payment for the bird and cage they left. Then I felt once more at ease, and led the child back into the house. That evening I dined with the General and Madam Mordaunt. Before I went out I entreated Betty, Mooney's nurse, to watch well over her in my absence, for somehow the wolfish expression of the man's eye haunted me, for never have I seen eyes so like those of a wild beast, or a smile so cruel as his was.

"Well, cousin, when I returned from visiting my old friends I crept upstairs at once. Somehow, all through dinner a terrible disquietude had possessed my soul, and I returned in my chair earlier than was my wont. 'Betty!' I called, but the woman gave me no answer. Then I hurried on through my little boudoir to the little room where the child slept. All was in disorder—the clothes of the cot had been hurriedly thrown aside, an empty bird-cage lay upon the floor, and the window stood wide open.

"I called 'Mooney! Mooney!' Child, where art thou?' No answer came back. Distracted, I ran over the house and round the garden, always searching for my little one. Betty, it seems, had slipped out of the house immediately after my departure to meet her lover. So, left by herself,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

my child was easily stolen. We called the watch, and I implored the aid of one of his Majesty's Ministers, through one of the Commons, and the Justices of the Peace exerted themselves. But, alas! it was all in vain. I also offered later a large reward, and promised secrecy, but never have I been able to learn anything of my daughter."

"Poor friend!" said Madame Mytton, and took both Claire's hands. "Do not give up all hope, it may yet come well, for God is a God of mercy. Trust Him, dear, and, believe me, the spirit bears the highest testimony of worth that receives adversity in loyal submission."

"I know," replied Claire, "but it is hard to bear. Death were better than to imagine my dear one going through privations and hardships, and, worse still, losing all that is sweet and lovely in child and maidenhood, and this by ill-usage, corruption and sin."

"Oh child!" said Madam Mytton gently, "I, too, have drunk of the cup of sorrow. Fifteen years ago our Henry died alone in the East Indies, and last year Florence died when her baby was born."

Claire did not answer, but her eyes filled with tears.

Then Madam Mytton got up and turning to her guest said, after a short pause, "You were

THE RETURN OF JOY

ever, dear, a perfect musician, and your voice is full of delicate feeling, and sweet sensibility. Come, Claire, sing me something, it will soothe you," and as Madam Mytton spoke she led her to the harpsichord.

"What shall I sing?" asked Claire. "Ah! those lines I wrote the other day. My kind friends, the Mordaunts, you must know, asked me a little while ago to spend the evening with them, but I was in no mood for gaiety, and even though I was told that their Royal Highnesses and members of the Court circle would grace the rout, I declined attending. Madam Mordaunt had begged me to come, and sing for them, but I feared to trust my voice before so august an assembly. 'Give not way to melancholy, my dear,' the general had said, but I had shaken my head, and then, cousin, in sorrow and in the loneliness of my own chamber I wrote these lines and set them to music. If their merit from an artistic point of view is but small, they come from my heart, and you will value them as such, I know."

Dark shadows fell around Claire. The twilight grew dim, and white mists rose from the meadow, and floated through the little walled garden, Alone the dying light of a smouldering fire fell upon her dress and hands.

"Shall I light a taper, child?" inquired Madam Mytton.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"Nay, nay," replied Claire, "my hands will find the keys, and my heart will know the rest."

So in the fading light Claire Corbet sang the song she had written in deepest sorrow :

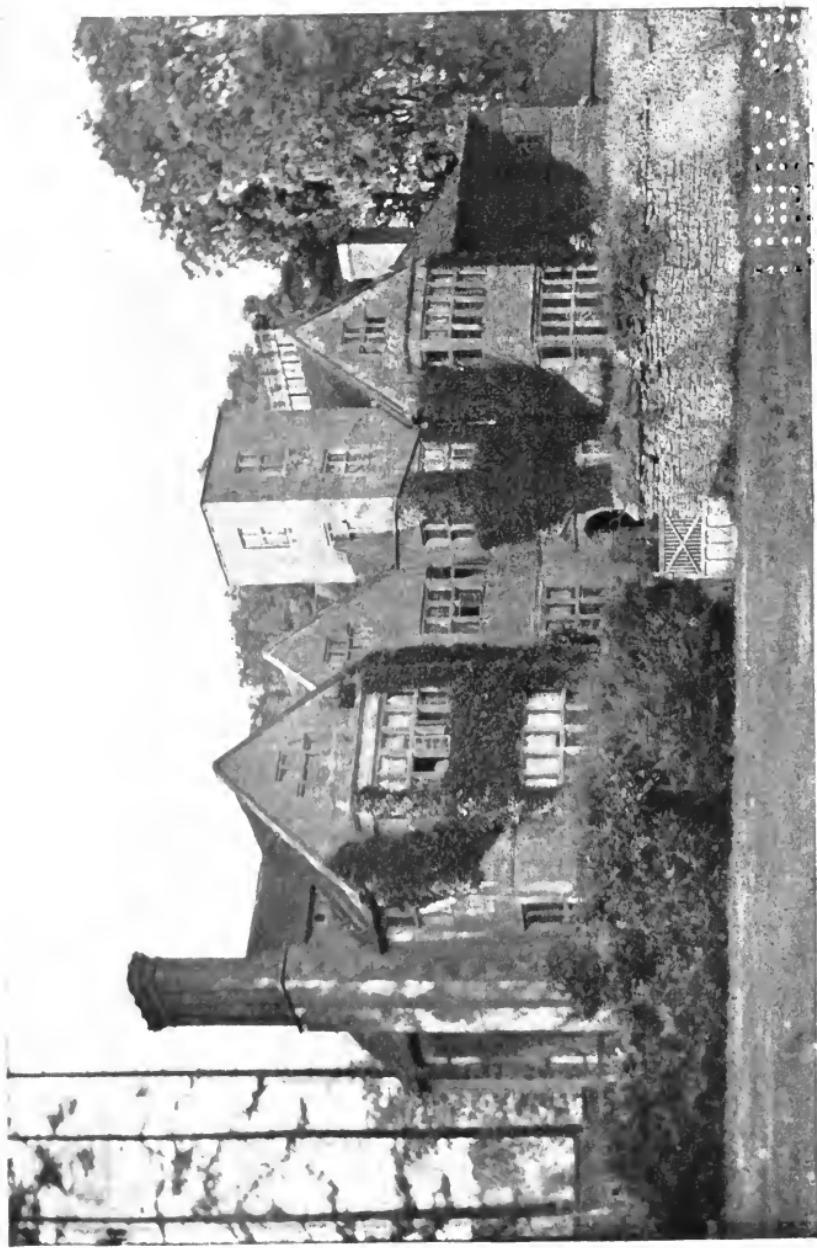
"Across the seas, wide, dim, and deep,
The spirits of the dead float o'er,
With closèd eyes they sigh and sleep,
In darkness veil'd they reach the shore—
Young love departs and sings no more—
His wings fall faint. He may not soar.

"Dear Ghosts ! O wave at least one hand,
Sound back one voice I crave to hear,
A message bring from that far land
Where tranquil hearts rest void of fear.
O speak ! though all is chill and grey—
Ye have my love, for ye I pray.

"Return, sweet guests of soul and air !
Your faces dear I fain would see.
The night is dark, yet stars shine fair,
And deep, through pain, dear joy may be.
So sweet the scents of other days,
So bright the hues of past sun's rays.

"Amidst my pain a glory grows,
O not of earth, my heart-felt woes—
Upon my tree there blooms no rose—
Yet shines His Light across my snows.
O blest the path the true have trod,
Then give me grace to wait my God."

Claire's voice seemed to fill the room with a sense of pathos and of prayer. Madam Mytton



SHIPTON HALL.



THE RETURN OF JOY

did not thank her, but gravely rose from her chair and kissed her.

"Child," she said, "He can comfort you," and so left the room.

Through the door Claire heard her weeping gently. Claire closed the instrument. "Ah! if a great joy could come," she murmured through her tears. She was still so young, and a great joy seems always possible to youth.

That night after dinner a party of ladies in soft diaphanous draperies, and brocades sat in the drawing-room at Shipton, whilst gentlemen in silk and velvet coats stood beside them.

Madam Mytton was laughing and talking to Sir Robert Lawley, who had driven over with his pretty daughter. There was also Lord Berwick from Attingham, Squire Childe from Kinlet and Madam Annabella his wife, Thomas Pemberton of Millichope, the Recorder for the Borough of Wenlock, and pretty Anna and her brother Nicholas Owen Smythe from Condover, besides young Forester from Willey, Squire Whitmore from Dudmaston, Parson Hazley from Burwarton, young Claude Morland from Cheshire, and Paul Faringdon from the West Riding of Yorkshire.

"You keep up all good customs, dear madam," Sir Robert was saying as he approached Madam Mytton, "as every good dame should. All Souls Day is a graceful observance, although we are

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

well and strong we do wisely to think of our dead at times. Besides which, all such festivals give much harmless amusement to the youngsters, and we who are in authority do well to keep up in such holidays a jovial fellowship with the people. Believe me, it is not the least part of the wisdom of our constitution."

Claire's melancholy seemed for the moment to have passed away. She appeared to all in her cousin's drawing-room as a fair and gracious being, charming and sympathetic. She was still attired in deep mourning, but diamonds shone in her hair, and her eyes were full of light. She was anxious in no wise to damp the spirits of her cousin's guests or to let her sorrow overcloud the enjoyment of the evening.

Claude Morland stood near her. He had long loved her, but he feared he had but little cause for hope.

"Never say die, lad," cheery Squire Mytton had said in the morning to him when they were out shooting. "Who knows? The roses bloom each year, and the spring flowers come however deep the snow falls in December—and it is not in nature for a lovely woman like Claire always to be sad and broken-hearted."

To this remark, however, Claude had sighed and answered, "You forget, sir, Claire is not like other women. Constancy is her nature."

THE RETURN OF JOY

Claude was now standing by Claire's side. "See how mild the season is," he was saying, and as he spoke he laid a rose in her lap.

She smiled, thanked him, toyed with the flower a minute and then laid it down gently on a little satin-wood table near her.

"Ah! here they come," broke in the squire suddenly. "There'll be plenty of them, and not one of the lads, my lord," he said to Lord Berwick with pride, "would touch a pheasant, or meddle with a fox-cub in any wood of mine. Faith! Sir Robert, is right; jolly fellowship is the best cement for honest dealing, and the wisest answer to the demagogues, and atheists across the Channel."

"Heaven forbid that we should ever live to see such awful things as have happened in France," said Madam Mytton with a shudder. "A good king, a pure priesthood, and a loyal people—these are the bulwarks by which we guard our shores."

Out of the darkness there arose a chorus of voices that sung in unison, "Soul, Soul for a Soul-cake":

"I pray, good madam, a soul-cake,
An apple or a pear, a plum or a cherry,
Any good thing to make us merry.
One for Peter, one for Paul,
Three for Him who made us all.
Up with the ladder, down with the can,
Give us good alms and we'll be gone."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Madam Mytton's miniature greyhound, Fido, barked defiance, but was caught up by Squire Mytton.

"Respect the good folks' calves, thou rascal," he said. Then Hal Tomkins, the old family butler, unbarred the oak front door, and admitted the country folk into the hall where the house-party joined them.

There was Peter Hodgkiss in his waggoner's smock; Jim Dykins, a shepherd; David Squire, the blacksmith of Brocton; Cuthbert Whinnall, the earth-stopper to the Hunt; and many others from the neighbouring villages and hamlets, with their wives, sweethearts, and children. The little boys capered about in smocks with garlands of oak-leaves and acorns wound round their hats, and a few of the girls carried staves with posies of the last flowers of the year attached to them. They all crowded in, and received a liberal allowance of cakes and apples from the hands of Mistress Ffilley, the old housekeeper, after which they sang:

"God bless the master of this house,
And the good mistress, too,
And all the gay folks fair
That round the table go.

"God bless your man and maiden,
Your cattle and your store,
And all that is within your gate,
We wish you ten times more.

THE RETURN OF JOY

" May your pockets swell with silver,
May your barrels run with beer ;
God's blessing rest with you, sir,
'Tis peace and joy we wish you here."

There was a little pause and then Squire Mytton stepped forward, and thanked them all for their song and good wishes. " Fill up their cans, Hal," he cried, " and let them all drink to the prosperity of the country and a lasting peace when it comes."

The old grey-haired butler bustled about whilst the men held out their cans which he filled again and again,

" How are the cakes ? " inquired the squire.

" Oh, the all-spice be pretty ! " replied old Sally Trow, an ancient dependant, who was engaged in munching one of them. " None can beat Mistress Ffilley in soul-cakes, for hers be the same recipe as my grandmother's."

" Well," said the squire, " a good recipe is like a good deed, none weary of it."

Afresh from outside came the sound of voices.

" Come in, come in all of you," shouted the squire, " whoever ye be."

" A soul-cake, a soul-cake !
Christ have mercy on all Christian souls."

and this was repeated over and over again.

" It be Job Jaundrell," said Peter Hodgkiss, " the idiot boy of Holgate."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"How comes the lad here?" asked Jim Dykins, "'tis a long step."

"Such idle varmint can allus come to a feast," answered Sally sourly. "The crows allus know the field when Farmer John ploughs."

"Let him in, idiot or no idiot," said the kindly squire. "He shall have his can of beer and his share of cakes and apples. Come, Hal, fill up the cans and you, Mistress Ffilley, replenish your baskets with cakes and apples." Then he turned to Will Grimmall, a footman, and ordered him to bring all into the hall whoever they might be.

Will opened the door and Job darted in, still calling out his rhyme.

"Make thy bow, numbskull," cried Sally. "Where be thy manners?"

"Gone with my wits, dame," replied Job, and then seeing the cakes he flew across the room with a scream of joy, and began to jabber and to devour the fruit and the cakes with incredible voracity.

"There are still folks without," said Will, as he came back. "They say they await your honour's pleasure. There is a man," he added in a lower key, "a tall lean varlet, an old crone and a little maid."

"What want they?" inquired the squire.

"They say, sir, as the child is an infant prodigy

THE RETURN OF JOY

or some such thing, learned in dancing, a sayer of comical rhymes and a wit."

"Let them in, Will," said the squire, "they may perhaps add to the amusement of all these good folks. Now then, my lads, make way."

Four or five little lads in smocks moved back on hearing themselves thus addressed.

Then there entered a tall gaunt man with a blackened face, a wizened old woman bent with age, and a little girl. As the man entered his gaze fell on Claire. He started back, but almost immediately recovered his self-control. All three had stained their faces.

"What come ye here for thus disguised?" asked Squire Mytton sternly. "It is not Christmas-tide."

"We come a-souling also," said the man. "Poor folks' lives are hard now, sir, that summer is gone; and we have not had time," he added, "to wash our faces since the rejoicings at Madam Bonham's, when we danced and sang as Africans."

"What art thou by trade?" continued Squire Mytton, "a gipsy or tinker? Such folk live idle lives, and as one of the king's justices I tell thee, fellow, I have but scant patience with vagabonds. Good work and good pay, that is my motto for the country-side."

In the meantime the old crone had walked up

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

to Madam Mytton and vowed in a wheedling tone that she could bring her good news if she would but cross her hand with a piece of silver, and as to the fair lady," she said, looking at Claire with a leer, "true love watches her, I'll be bound, and will shoot her with his arrow to-night."

But here again the squire interposed, whilst Claire blushed, and Claude moved away lest his presence might displease her.

"We want no fortunes told here ; good people make their own," he said. "But if it is true thy little maid can dance and sing, let her perform before us, and ye shall eat your fill, and she shall have a silver sixpence besides. 'Tis a dusky little wench," he remarked, looking at the child, "but dirt can sometimes hide sharp wits, so little lass begin, and so ye govern yourselves with propriety," and here he turned again to the man and the old crone, "ye shall have nothing to fear."

Then the little maid advanced and began to dance. She caught up her skirts and pirouetted round and round, after which she scampered about, making many droll grimaces. She cut capers, leapt, and did a hundred strange antics, and all with a gravity and decorum, that provoked yells and screams of laughter from the assembled rustics.

THE RETURN OF JOY

“‘Tis a precious little morsel of sin steeped in pleasure,” remarked old Sally.

“If Old Nick could entice like that there’s few as he couldn’t catch,” replied Mistress Ffilley severely, and she pursed up her mouth and turned her eyes away from the child ; but Hal, taking his cue from his master, gave himself up to roars of hearty laughter, and vowed that “there was nothing of the devil in the little one, only a little girl with the ways and wiles of a magpie, and a kitten combined, and that she was a pretty and proper popinjay for any holiday.”

All the time the tall dark man with the darkened face stood by the door and played his fiddle, but ever from time to time glared out of his evil eyes at the little girl and at the company.

At the close of the dancing the child ran round to Madam Mytton’s guests, repeating with the quaintest little gestures :

“The roads are very dirty,
My shoes are very thin,
I’ve got a little pocket
To put a penny in.”

The guests laughed, and showered small coins into her pocket. Then at last the little girl turned to the man with the fiddle, exclaiming, “See what the Quality have given me,” and held up her reticule to him. In silence he took the

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

coin, and then, after counting it, whispered something to her.

"Must I dance again?" she asked, and began to whimper, "I be so tired, so tired." Then he looked at her with a hideous scowl, and the child shrank from him.

"Come," cried the good-natured squire, "come, little one; thou hast made my sides ache with laughter, 'tis time for thee to get thy portion of cakes and apples. If thou may not keep the coin, at least these shall be for thyself," and as he spoke the squire held up above the little girl's head two of the cakes and an apple. "Jump, lassie, jump, a little dancer like thee should be able to reach them anywhere," and as he spoke Squire Mytton placed the fruit and cakes on the high oak shelf of the old mantelpiece.

"They will be better for supper than hatchi-witchi (hedgehog)," retorted the child, and with one bound she darted forward and tried to stand on the brass fender and so to attain the squire's gifts; but as she did so the fender moved, toppled over, and she fell into the fire.

A scream of horror arose from the ladies, but in a moment Claude Morland had dashed forward, had rescued the little girl, and was rolling her vigorously in the hearthrug to put out the flames, which had caught hold of her dress.

THE RETURN OF JOY

"The little blackamoor is only frightened," he said. "She is not really hurt."

"She bain't no real darky," cried the idiot, and began to laugh and caper about Mistress Ffilley, and rob her baskets of cakes and apples as no one was looking.

"Are you sure she is not hurt?" asked Claire. "Poor little thing, she seems terribly frightened. Let us wash her face and hands and make certain that she is not burnt." Then turning to one of the servants who happened to be standing near her, she bade him bring her a basin of water and a towel.

The man returned in a few moments, and placed the ewer and towel on a bench before the fire. Then Claire led the trembling child to where these stood.

"I will not hurt you, little maid," she said; "only let us wash off the dirt, and make certain that you are not really injured."

At this remark, to the surprise of all present, the tall gaunt man to whom apparently the child belonged stepped forward and forbade the lady to cleanse her face.

"She is a daughter of the Vesh (wood)," he said, "and needs no such care. Bee-bee Chimpari, her aunt, will attend to her later, as I will," and as he spoke he glared at the child out of his wild wolfish eyes.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

At this the little girl began to tremble violently, and cried out in fear, "Oh lady, do not let him touch me. He is the great Bing (devil). I have given him all the money, indeed I have, not a loli (a farthing) have I kept for myself. Spare me, oh ! spare me master this once. I fell, but it was not my fault," and in an agony of terror she clung to her protector's skirts.

Claude laughed defiantly, and then stooped down and began to wash the little gipsy maiden's face.

Then a most wonderful thing happened, for suddenly, without a word, Claire seized the little girl in her arms and kissed her passionately over and over again. "Mooney ! my little Mooney !" she cried, and in her hand she held a locket which had fallen from the child's neck. "God has given me back my child," she murmured in an ecstasy of joy.

Then with a horrible curse, like the howl of a wild beast, the gipsy, followed by the old crone, who suddenly seemed to possess marvellous agility, leapt out of the window into the darkness.

"Young bones in old bags," exclaimed the idiot boy, and continued to fill his pockets with cakes and apples.

Some of the guests rushed out into the garden in hot pursuit, and the squire drew his sword and ran also, but the shadows hid the miscreants, and

THE RETURN OF JOY

when the party returned they found a happy mother and her child. The country folk were many of them in tears, and Sally Trow vowed it was more moving than the death of her white hen twelve months agone.

"God has given me back my child," repeated Claire softly, "and the great joy has come."

Claude looked at her tenderly. "The little girl is heavy," he said, "let me carry her for you. I will do so very gently," and he took her in his arms.

"I'se very comfy," said Mooney. Then she turned to her mother and said, "Sing to me, mum mum, sing as you used to sing in the house I disremember."

Then Claire went in silence to the harpsichord and sang softly, whilst the villagers stood round and listened with wrapt attention :

"Ah, sweet as song of summer day,
And pure as fallen dew of night,
As bright my joy as golden ray
That falls and falls as star of light.
So sad ! so gay ! the songs of earth,
When breath'd by Love and brought by Death.

"Like chant of lark mid azure blue,
So mount my strains of praise and grace.
Dull grief I leave, to find anew
My little love of primrose face.
So sad ! so gay ! the songs of earth,
When breath'd by Love, and brought by Death.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

“The woodlands sweet, they bend with scent,
 The spring winds shake each petal fair,
With odours rich the groves are blent,
 For me there blooms a blossom rare.
So sad ! so gay ! the songs of earth,
When breath’d by Love, and brought by Death.

“A radiant joy, my soul doth light,
 O glad is sunshine after rain,
And dear the dawn that follows night,
 And sweet the bliss that touches pain.
So sad ! so gay ! the songs of earth,
When breath’d by Love, and brought by Death.”

One by one the country folk bowed and curtsied, and left the old Hall to return to their homes across the fields. A little later Claire bore Mooney in her arms to her chamber, and mother and child slept together interlaced in each other’s arms.

Through the white mists the voice of the idiot boy alone broke the silence of the night, calling in endless reiteration :

“A soul-cake ! a soul-cake !
 Christ have mercy on all Christian souls.”

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

IT was a lovely calm afternoon one day in June in the first half of the eighteenth century. There had been twelve hours of splendour from early morning until sunset. Warm, soft, and exquisite, the perfection of an English day. The buttercups had glittered in the long hours of sunshine, whilst the birds had sung merrily. Linnet, thrush and blackbird, all had united in one grand chorus of praise and rejoicing. Carpets of moon-daisies and poppies decked the fields, and the grass everywhere waved in lush tufts of green, such as can only be found in England, ready for the mower's scythe.

Old Josh Jakes, as he was called, spat upon his palm and then continued to dig vigorously, croaking to himself an old rhyme :

“ When a man’s rich, then a man’s wise,
Look to it, lass, whatever your eyes.”

“ He what wrote they words,” said the old man meditatively, “ wrote solid well-ploughed sense—same as Tommy Tykes had when he

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

dodged the bailiffs, and got off without payin'," and the old man chuckled.

Jakes was clad in a faded red shirt, soiled corduroys to the knees, and dark blue worsted stockings.

"Love indeed, without gold," he continued aloud; "why 'tis as foolish a foliy as hatchin' suckin'-gulleys in September. Bound to die come winter frosts, same as the birds, and then diseases, pale faces, and rent, with never a penny to pay—that's their lot, and yet there's my Madge, a buxom bobbish lass, but what has not got the sense of an unweaned calf, talkin' of love. 'Give me my Rowland,' is all her cry, as huffle-footed, awkward a chap, as ever I seed. No money in he"—and Jakes hacked at a weed ferociously—"long, sprawly, and useless—even broke his leg last year. I don't want to think of a fellow that broke his leg," and the old man shook his head viciously.

"It makes me humorsome (peevish) but to bend my mind to him, and all along because he wud do another man's work. I've no patience with they as wud better the Gospel. Keep in the boat, say I, and let they swim as hasn't been able to bash their way. It be only Christian to mind yerself. The Book says, 'Let every man look to his own soul,' and why not to his own body too, I'd like to know," and then the old man paused to throw a spadeful of lime from a pail that stood by him.

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

After a minute he went on chattering to himself : " Them gals is allus given to blub, smirk, or bridle ; 'tis their natur', and they *must* fancy a lop-lollard (a good-for-nothing). They takes to 'em like flies to the sugar-basin. They be silly things, be women ; birdy-brained, not a Latin name about 'em. Tears in their eyes and little work in their hands as long as they have got rosebuds in their cheeks and stars-shine in their eyes. Later, when the crow's-feet come round their eyes, they gets to know what's what, but yer can't teach the foolish petticoat-trotters what life be as long as they be on the prance. Teaching 'em sense be like trying to make a tup go pretty in a halter."

Here old Jakes burst forth into a shrill peal of laughter and rested from his labours for a minute, opening wide, as he did so, his almost toothless gums. At the same time from the stables clock sounded the hour of six.

" Well," said the old man, " it be my hour. I'll get back and get a drink. No heel-taps for me, but a right long lip on the cup. It be but small beer, but the weakest be good to a man who has worked since six of the morning, and better than any woman's smile or word," and he smacked his lips with relish. Then he paused for a moment and stood facing the stately manor of Benthall in the old walled kitchen-garden where he had been working.

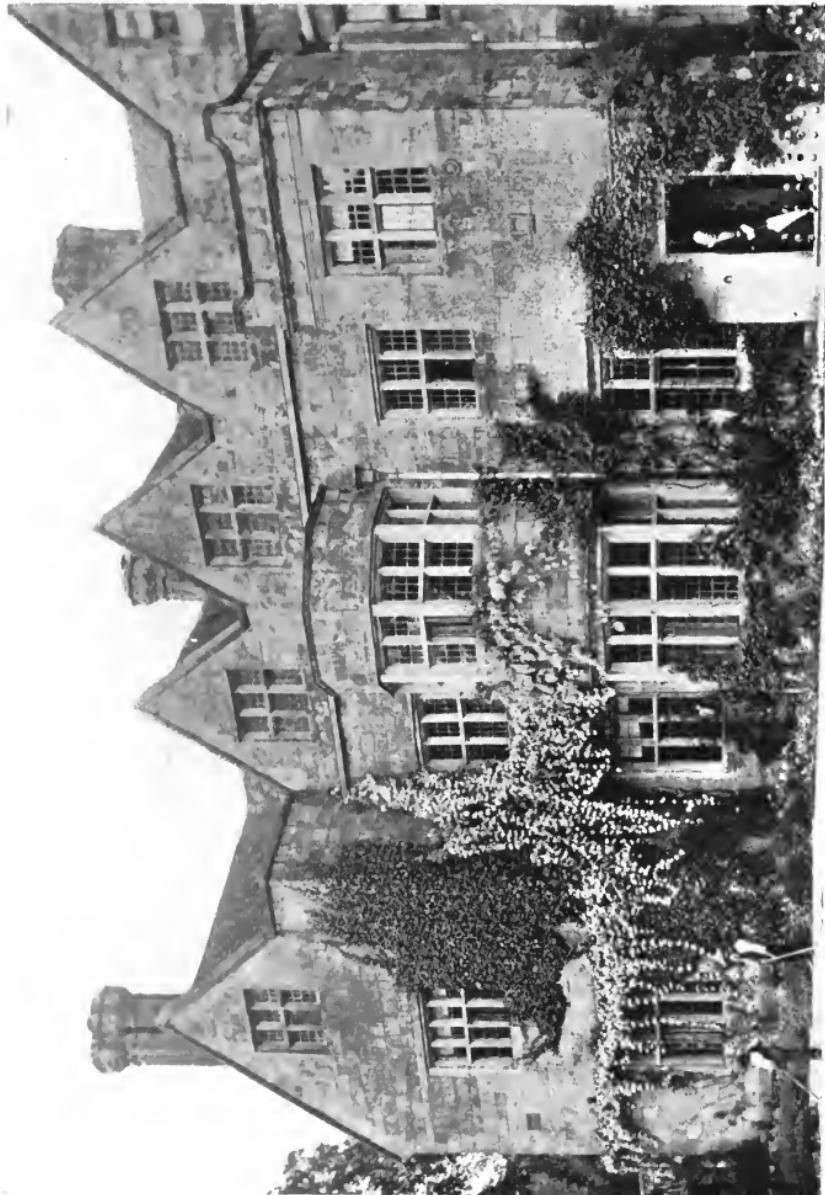
OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

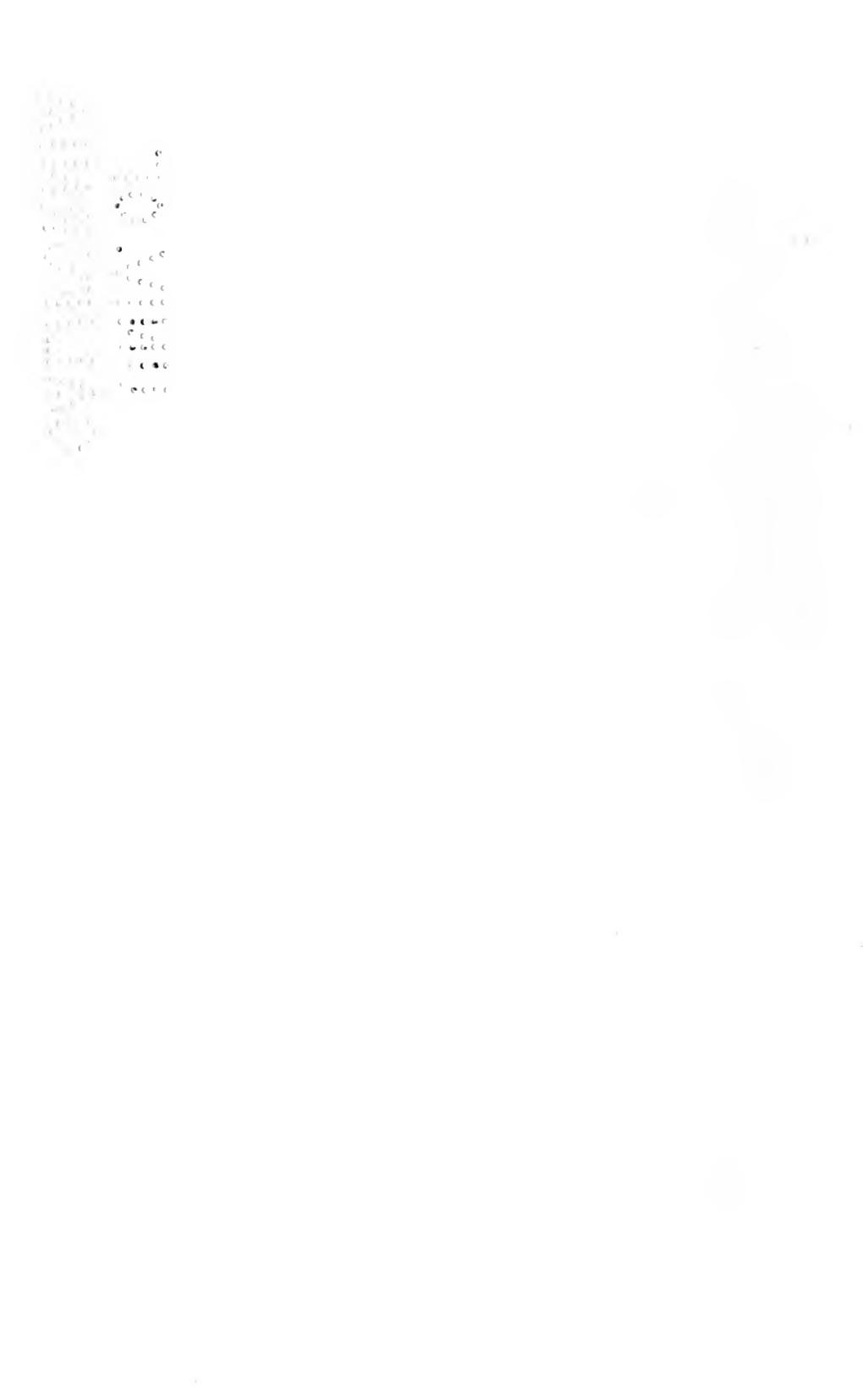
The dying day flashed upon the mullion windows, and lit all up with a red glory before fading into the west.

" 'Tis a beautiful place," said Jakes in a hushed tone, a strange tenderness lighting up his face. " Yes, a beautiful place, and if I war an emperor I'd only live at Benthall. I have lived here ever since I war a boy. I knows every inch, every plant; I knows the side and the full face of pansies, roses, and lupins, and the yew and hornbeam hedges I have a-clipt and pleached this forty years and more, since I could hold the shears or ply the scythe. Well," he said, looking at the stately house and formal gardens with intense affection, "'tis more to me than wife nor childer. Yer can get a new wife, but never a new home," and as he spoke the hard lines in old Jakes' face seemed to soften, and he looked proudly round upon the trim alleys, the neat paths, and the broad expanse of verdant turf of brilliant green, and at the high hedges of yew and hornbeam. His eyes rested lovingly on a peacock quaintly cut in yew, in verdant statuary as it was then called, and surrounded by balls of like workmanship.

" Yes," he murmured approvingly; " they pretty baubles they be proper workmanship, true as line and shears can make them. I can bleach and clip against any man. I began they under my father forty-seven years agone next Michael-

BENTHALL HALL.





THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

mas. 'Tis the dumb things as holds yer when yer gets a man—same as ropes. Yer know as the talkin' things bain't much, and don't touch yer fiddle-strings."

As Jakes hoisted his spade over his shoulder preparatory to leaving it in the wood-shed before going home, there tripped towards him a dainty girlish figure clad in soft white drapery. The sunlight gilded the young girl's mouse-tinted hair, flashed upon her sun-bonnet, and lit up the blue ribbon with which it was tied. For a moment, as the maiden stepped out of the shade, she seemed bathed in a glory of crimson light.

"What be come here for?" snarled Jakes as he recognised his daughter. "What holus-bolus business be this, maid, that thou art decked out like the Mayor of Shrewsbury's daughter, or for a Maypole dance. Where art goin'?" Then after a pause he added spitefully, "I'll be bound 'tis to meet thy good-for-nothing sixfoot huffle-heeled lollup. Stay at home and mind the pot, or darn dad's stockings; but if thou must gad, then take up with one as can pay for thy folly and flummery. Thou hast the sense of a hay-tick (the common white-throat). Thee wants strawberries on silver dishes and yet thou must needs have thy fancy too—wed thy greenhorn and bide in luxury. 'Tis past bearing"; and here his weazened face became crimson with passion. "I tell thee, girl," he cried,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"if thou defiest me my stick shall be acquainted with thy back—for all that thou art a maid. Thou hast been granny-reared but I'll take the codling out of thee if I bates thy mother with the same rod."

To this flow of angry words Madge made no answer, but her pretty blue eyes filled with tears as she stood before her father.

At last she summoned up courage to say, "Oh! father, don't 'e take on like that. I be here because Madam Partridge, the housekeeper, sent for me, and as to me and Rowland we don't mean no harm. We don't mean to be undutiful nohow. If only thee wouldn't forbid us to keep company I'd wait and wait or go out and earn enough for us both to marry, and I'm sure that Rowland's poor leg will stand firm and strong after a bit. He can walk on it now, and the doctor says come another six months he may prance as a prince, as he used to do at Wenlock on Holy Thursdays, or at Bridgnorth Fair."

"Hold thy addled tongue," retorted her father furiously. "Dost think, wench, I can listen to thy mouldy meanderings. Thou boomest like a bittern on the Clee-side. Stay at home and griddle a slice of ham if thou canst do naught better."

At this cruel speech Madge could restrain her tears no longer. "Oh! father," she cried, "thy

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

tongue will be the death of me. Thou hast no call, for all thou art my father, to speak thus to me. I don't want to do nothing but what is fair and square, true and honest. I'll wait as long as thou wilt for the lad that loves me, but I'd rather sweep the streets of Shrewsbury town with a grig-besom than give up Rowland."

"I'll teach thee to mock at me, thou over-mothered, useless, sit-at-home, fettern (lazy) piece," exclaimed Jakes. "Dost think, thou green haihow (woodpecker), that I can bide thy screechings and fanteags? Take thy lover—I know thee! if thou dost, afore the year be out thou'll look twenty years older. Tears and want will be thy portion. Pinched face and blue lips for all thy bravery now. I can see thee as counterwise as Martha Rhoden's two-penny dish."

"Nay," replied Madge with the courage of despair, "I'll face it out as Geoffrey faced the cat."

At hearing his daughter speak thus, a fierce curse broke from Jake's lips. "Thou young viper!" he cried, "I'll learn thee to talk thus"; and in his fury he was about to strike his daughter when his hand was stayed by the apparition of his master. Down one of the trim alleys of the pleasaunce, that led past the bowling-green to the walled kitchen-garden, a tall slim figure dressed in the fashion of the day walked towards them.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Richard Benthall was attired in dark purple velvet with soft lace at the throat, and falling ruffles at the sleeves of the same material. He wore a powdered wig and shoe-buckles that glittered in the sunshine.

“How now, Jakes?” he cried severely; “whence all this talk and noise? Respect, man, respect! Remember that I am never far off, and recollect that I will not stand my meditations being disturbed. Dost think I want to hear thy ravings, or the opinions of any of the common herd? Forbear thy ratings—and remember that, once for all, I will have no loud-tongued follies here, and that I will not permit my leisure to be ruined by thy outcry.”

At this stern rebuke Jakes hung his head down. “No man could face the squire’s wrath,” he always asserted, and in spite of the fear the old man entertained for his master, perhaps just because of it, he had for him a real and deep reverence—for, to use his own words: “The squire he dreamt amongst the stars, and trod beyond common folks’ heads.”

When Richard Benthall had done speaking Jakes attempted a feeble vindication of his conduct, crying out several times in hesitating, disconnected sentences: “No disrespect, your honour.” “Nought but the folly of a maid.” “Sure, I didn’t mean no rudeness,” and other words of a similar character.

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

For all reply Squire Benthall frowned and waved him aside.

"Begone!" at length he said sternly, "and remember in future these are private grounds. I live alone. Let there be no gossiping here. Your work is done—depart!"

After saying this, Richard Benthall turned quickly on his heel and returned towards the house, leaning heavily on his silver-headed cane.

At his master's expressions of anger old Jakes had trembled. He stood unmovable, gazing after the retreating figure. He watched him pass along the bevelled box-edged paths, past the old sun-dial, and so into the old Elizabethan house. Then he turned, with a fierce gleam in his old eyes, and said to his daughter :

"It was thy fault, thou good-for-nothing, airy-pated, worthless slut, with thy megrims and all thy blue-headed nonsense. Thy kitten-puling, finikin fancies will be the ruin of me. If thou wert a good daughter, thou wud leave thy finding and proving, arguments and folly, and bide by what I say; but the young 'uns now they thinks as there's nothing as them can't teach us. They'd like to learn the widdies (ducklings) how to swim, and the chucks how to pick, and even grandam's cat how to go a-mousing. Thee's cunning, thee and thy six feet of waste and want. Well, I'll curse thee, come what may, if

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

by any deed or word of thine I lose this my place."

Jakes did not stop to hear Madge's gentle words of conciliation, but trudged forward rocking with passion, and dragging his spade inertly behind him.

Madge did not attempt to stay or to follow him home. "What was the good?" she reasoned. "Father was," she termed it, "set against poor Rowland, same as her mother's old tabby against the new terrier pup, sure enough. Arguing with one as won't hear," she declared in her Aunt Sal's language, "was like saving at the spigot and wasting at the bunghole. When father wudn't he wudn't, and yer might as well ask a bull at the stake to be friends as to expect father to see with other folks' eyes, or to sit down and hear what he didn't like."

"Some men were born to drink," her brother Ned would say. Well, she supposed some fathers were born nasty by the same cause—at least she knew her father was took some times so.

"Behappen, says Jock Dallow," her lover would say, quoting a Shropshire phrase, by which folks meant formerly that all would come right in the end.

Madge did not always believe him, or join in his optimistic views of life. "Thou hast a light heart, lad," she would say with a sad smile.

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

"Aye, dear!" he would answer, throwing his handsome head back, "I be as lively as a maggot, for all that be coming, for haven't I won thee, sweetheart, and love such as ours, for all they can say, be as long as the chimbleys of Plaish Hall."

"Aye, love," Madge would reply. "But we'll be as naked as robins, and as poor as mice in Shipton Church," and Madge would look down sorrowfully, "unless luck comes our way soon."

At this Rowland would put his arms around his maid, and say in his old masterful way, "For all we'll be poor, my dear, we'll be as proud and pleased as a pair of tits in bells. Thy dad's words may be as wet as a yard of muck, but I knows of a sunshine as can gild and dry 'em;" and with that he would stride away, calling out over his shoulder, "There's naught like the sauce of a strong man's love."

As soon as Madge heard her father close the wrought-iron wicket, she slipped out of the main entrance, down the avenue of elms and across the fields to Wyke, a hamlet that stands on the lime rock, almost opposite the woods of Tickwood, and from which the town of Much Wenlock and the ruined abbey are visible.

Madge walked on until she came close to a little house that stands by itself from the lane that now leads to Tickwood Hall and tapped at the door.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"What 'e want?" croaked a husky, shaky voice from inside. "I be washin', and that be a job which a dainty one like thee won't hanker after."

"Oh! let me in, mother," pleaded Madge. "I must speak with Rowland, and if he bain't back I'll sit and wait—trim the window plants, or clean the throstle's cage. I'll turn to and fettle summat, only let me in."

"Highty tighty!" quavered the voice inside. "What be up to now? A maid that be in a hurry be up to no good, I'll be sworn."

"I b'aint after no harm," pleaded Madge.

"No," retorted the old woman inside, "I'll be bound thou art like a chip in milk, no harm and no good. 'Tis the way with yer young feckless things; yer means no wrong, but yer be all as lazy and wishful to curl in a chair as Kitten Hallet's dog, and yer expects the Lord's meat to fall into yer mouths as if yer was the Quality—roast larks, basted and tasty as yer take yer airing."

There was a pause, and then a sound as of dripping water wrung from a garment, and afterwards the creaking of a stool pushed back quickly across the tiled floor, and a second later Dame Morris stood before her opened door.

"Come in," she muttered, "and say thy business."

Madge entered, and sat down on an oak stool.

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

" 'Tis to see Rowland I've come," she said simply. "I must go ; father's cruel hard upon me, and I canna bide longer at home. Father's tongue be like a two-edged razor ; and all because I holds to Rowland. Our courting be as crooked as Dick's hat-band. Nothing but pain and discouragement ; but there, I can't give up Rowland, for whatever happens he's my man."

The last words Madge spoke with enthusiasm, a pretty flush overspreading her young flower-like face.

"Ah, there it be !" said her old companion. "Dad won't have thy wedding, I hear, and cuts up rough, and looks at Rowland like a cow at a foisted calf. Is thy eye, then, so set on the one lad that thee can't think at times also of Ben Bodenham ? He be a likely lad for all the other's a pretty fellow. Big and burly is Ben, what many a maid might fancy, and is not only nephew but heir to old Master Ebenezer Beaman, tallow-chandler in the Hospital Street of Much Wenlock. Thee might marry 'un and live in the shop. There's a pretty place for thee," and old Priss Morris chuckled. "Folks passing, like beasts at a fair, and never a mucky job for thy husband, night or day ; naught but parcel-tying and a bow to the Quality. Why it wud make some folks' eyes water the very thought on it."

"Then let 'em have it," broke out Madge indig-

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

nantly, and she jumped up, "I didn't come," she continued, "for to hear thee take that line. I thought I'd find thee straight and honest by my lad, seein' as 'twas thee as reared 'un and nursed 'im from a baby. I thought thee'd have a good word for 'un, and wud favour our meetings. Why," continued Madge, her eyes flashing, "Rowland has been with thee afore he could walk, even when he could, I've heard mother say, have been put in a quart mug, for all the fine fellow he is now, and yet thou canst turn on 'im, 'im as has been good and kind to thee, manful and willin' allus. When did he ever refuse to carry water to thy pig, or give a hand brewing-times? Thee hast a heart of stone."

"Yer be all alike," grumbled Mother Morris, an evil light in her beady eyes. "A pair of blue eyes and the job is done. Thy father is right, wench. A lad's work with the women be nothing compared to a man's carriage and the tone of his voice. If a chap be throstle-tongued and have a pretty shock of hair he may sit all day on a stile and whistle, and the lasses will fume and sweat for 'un, and toil their arms off in his service to bring him beer and heaven knows what kickshaws. Thou beest only one of the many spick and span now, my deary, what will turn into drudge and slut later. Ye be all alike, old and young, simple and cunning; why, even the awful witch, Kate

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

Havelock, her that lives at Sherlot Forest, *her* have a-took a fancy to thy Rowland."

"She have a-took a fancy to my Rowland," repeated Madge, turning very pale. "Ah! don't tell me that," she cried out as one in pain, "for that wud be like sharp knives to my heart. I could not give up Rowland."

"Like enough thee'll have to see 'un go," mumbled old Priss, watching her victim with the same pleasure that a cat watches a wounded mouse. "Witches will have best cuts, no cag-mag (bad meat) for they. Why, when he war ill her wud come here."

"*She* came here!" fell from Madge's lips.

"Her came here true as Gospel truth," said Priss with an ugly leer. "I tell 'e what I say be as true as I war christened with my four brothers and one sister all to a time in Wenlock Church. *Her* came herself, her great luckless self—Kate of the Forest as they call her at Barrow. *Her* as is as great a witch as any in the county of Salop. Her used to come when Rowland was ill, in the gloaming, when all was still and quiet as a hill churchyard week-days; when there war no sound but the calling of the corn-crake or the crying of the Jack-squealers across the dusk. That war last year, and her wud cry and cry outside in the garden; and Rowland, he wudn't so much as speak to her, for all her was a witch, and then her wud

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

lie down amongst the musk by the porch and sob and sob till it seemed as if her wud cry her soul away, and never move till the dawn."

"Crocodiles' tears and witches' be the same, I have heard," said Madge in passionate anger ; "but for all her devil's tricks she sha'n't get him."

"That's what Rowland says," said Mother Morris.

"Brave Rowland," cried Madge exultantly. "How I love him for bein' stout-hearted and keeping his pecker up. That be like my lad all over. Roddie, he's of the right sort ; real heart of oak, strong and loving, and I praise God every night that I've got 'im, and I'll keep 'im."

"Don't thee be too sure of that," laughed Priss evilly. "The Almighty, He don't like fightin' with witches ; leastways, not unless He have a parson and holy water handy."

"There's no need of such," cried Madge hotly. "Our love be strong enough to send witch and devil howling."

The old crone looked at the girl attentively and then burst into a long fit of mirthless laughter.

"Thee's as certain of thy man as Will Dangs war of his sow ; but here's thy lad, ask him thyself," and as Priss spoke the little wooden wicket swung back cherrily, and Rowland Ryder, as he was called, strode up the little pebbled path or causeway leading to the cottage.

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

"What, thee here, love?" he cried, seeing Madge, and before she could answer he had embraced her joyously.

Rowland was singularly handsome, tall and lithe, with a well-proportioned figure, and had a look of distinction and refinement which seemed out of place in one of his calling—that of a ploughman. He had delicate, small hands, finely shaped, although bronzed by exposure, and handling rough things; blue eyes and a straight line of features, arched eyebrows and a mass of curly light brown hair which clustered round his forehead in natural curls. He was a goodly sight, and his voice was particularly gentle and pleasing, and justified old Mother Morris' appellation of "throstle-tongued."

The only thing that slightly marred his personal effect was a limp at times.

"How art thou, dear?" inquired Madge.

"Oh! the leg will mend, give 'un time," laughed Rowland, "but it bides a bit stiff after a day on the land. But I'm goin' hearty in myself, and feel fit, my dear, to do anything. Parson's been kind and given me a bottle of lotion."

"Some 'un else has been kind too," interrupted Priss with meaning, "and left a pot of summat here for thee."

"Who? Not *her*?" cried out Rowland, and at the thought of a gift from the witch his handsome face darkened with passion.

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

"Why not, man?" retorted the old woman. "A cat may look at a king, and a witch may bring a faring to whom she pleases for aught I know. Yes, I have summat from *her* that comes and asks for thee; from she that craves for thee, my lad, and cried for thee when thou wert ill, same as a beast mourning for its calf."

"*She* has dared to come here," thundered Rowland. "I tell thee I'll have naught to do with witches and their devil gammocks (games). Her philter or potion shan't bide here. Out with all devil's broth and unguents," and as he spoke Rowland strode up to a little hanging cupboard of oak where he knew Mother Morris kept her salves and her herb potions, and opened the door.

"Out with it, I say," he cried.

Priss looked at him and turned pale. "Thou art a wilful man," she whimpered; "strong and swift-blooded, but thee had better not meddle with witches or witches' wares. They holds spells and charms as can bind even against the Lord's anointed and His Book, and I tell thee, man,"—and here she lowered her voice—"when I last looked into Kate Havelock's eyes, I looked into hell. Beware!" she muttered in her excitement. She had hobbled up from her seat, and stood leaning on her stick beside the cupboard, her old head shaking as with the palsy, and her aged hands trembling with fear.

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

For all reply Rowland pushed her quickly aside and peered amongst the cupboard shelves. He saw there stowed away bottles of elderberry wine, decoctions of herb-robert and of pink mallow; pots of the white garden-lily bulbs boiled down with goose-fat, and jars of nettle beer. Rowland impatiently pushed back the jars from him. "I know they," he cried. "These be all harmless and Christian, fit for man and beast."

Madge watched him in breathless excitement. "Thee will not use it, lad," she implored, "for it may be a philter or a charm, and though it looks harmless it may have great Satan in it himself."

"I'll mak' short work on it," growled her lover "when I lay my hand on it. A witch's gift, faugh! I'd as soon nurse muck from the mixen-heap," and as he spoke Rowland continued all the while pushing the jars backwards and forwards in his search after the witch's gift.

At last, in a corner of the top shelf, his hand lighted on a little bluish-grey pot. It was a strange-looking thing. "What be that?" he cried, and held it forth.

The top of the little vessel was tied down with goose-skin, and on the cover had been painted an arrow in red, and round the arrow were written words in curious fantastic characters.

"Here it be!" cried Rowland, "and with a devil's message on top. But I'll mak' 'adone with

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

it. Love," and he turned to Madge, "get down the Bible; when yer deals with witches let the Lord be thy guide."

"Leave that there Bible," cried out Priss hurriedly pushing in front. "Us don't want no preachy devil's prayers. I don't hold with such catercornelled (one-sided) blit-bat business. Parson Sundays, and then let the devil have his due. 'Tis the only course for a long life and a safe 'un. I knows my duty, and I won't imperil my mortal soul by playin' fox and hare with both."

But Rowland paid no attention to Priss' protestations. "Open the book," he said to Madge, "and the Lord will direct thy heart and eye."

Trembling with fear, yet with a loyal heart, Madge complied with her lover's desire. She went across the room to the dresser and fetched the Bible. Her fingers opened upon the fifty-eighth Psalm, and her eyes fell upon the seventh verse: "Let them melt away as waters which run continually. When he bendeth his bow to shoot his arrows let them be as cut in pieces." Madge read the verse aloud, her voice running up into a high treble key in her agitation, as is the way of the women of the West. Then there was a pause, and no sound save the singing of a bird outside.

At last the silence was broken by Rowland's voice. "The Lord has spoken," he said solemnly,

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

and he went and stood before the hearth. A fire was burning, above which a great black pot hung, in which was stewing the evening meal. Rowland stood for a second or two looking grimly into the flames.

"It is the Lord's word," he said, "and it shall melt as waters that run continually;" and then, without more ado, he flung the little blue pot boldly amongst the blazing logs.

The jar broke with a crash, and the unguent oozed out. Strange violet and blue flames burst up amongst the logs, and hissed as they fled up the chimney like malignant voices.

Madge crept up to her lover, as he remained staring into the fire with a pale fixed face.

"Thou hast done right, dear," she said, watching him closely, and laying one hand in his. "Thou hast burnt up the abomination. The Lord, dear heart, will deliver thee."

Then Rowland, moved by a sudden impulse, swept the pretty trembling maiden into his arms, and embraced her fervently. "There shan't none come between us," he whispered. "If it was the great Satan hisself, so help me God I'd fight for thee to the death. I love thee, my lass, better than I love my own soul, and I'd cling to thee to the last drop of blood inch by inch, and worse if needs be, —I'd kill for thee."

Madge looked up and said, "My brave lad!" and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

then added, a little shyly, "but for all that thee mustn't sin for me."

"Some men are drawn to it," said Rowland slowly. "It is the power of Hell that fastens on their souls, however much they strive," and into his eyes there came a wild light of despair. As he spoke he was conscious of a cold numbing sensation, and he released Madge without another word. "Was it fancy?" but at the same moment he thought there appeared a face against the glimmering casement—a sad, weary, worn face, like that of a woman who has breasted deep waters of affliction, who has loved and lost, and who wanders over men's earth heart broken, miserable, with a cry of despair ever raging in her heart—an alien, unloved, lonely, an outcast.

"See," cried Rowland, and pointed to the lattice window, "we be watched."

A minute afterwards, rising on the breeze, arose a cry of some creature as in pain. It wailed and moaned, and was horrible to hear in its agony.

"Lord Almighty, what be that, man?" cried Priss trembling. "It be no earthly thing; like enough the voice of some soul calling for mercy, and finding none."

At these words the two young people made no reply, but ran out speechless with horror into the garden. After a few moments the moaning ceased.

THE WITCH'S UNGUENT

"May happen," said Rowland at length, "it was nought but some cat, poor beast, screeching in its pain. Shem Hodgkiss's be cruel hard against all furry things, as sports for theyselves."

For a little while Rowland and Madge continued looking into the grey distance. A thick white mist, a promise of future fine weather, had risen, and rested like a mystic white drapery over the dim meadows below. Far away a dog barked from a distant hill, but otherwise there was no sound of life.

"Don't 'ee fear, my lass," cried Rowland at last. "I'll keep a stout heart and arm come what may, and I'll guard thee like the apple of mine eye."

Then out of the cottage, with a voice like that of a frog croaking in a rock, they heard old Priss's quavering tones.

"Gather yer posies and laugh your laughs, my pretties, while ye can, for ye have but short bides for yer skips and your plays, and hay time comes but once a year. The witch will call, and hers be a call that all must hear, however deaf they be."

Rowland heard and understood; but the calm of the evening, and the reassuring sense that his love was near him, gave him fresh courage, and at the old crone's ominous words he only laughed, and called out, "Don't 'ee think as thee can hoodwink us, mother. Not I nor Madge will dwinder (suffer) for what us has done to-night. Right's right,

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

missus, all the world over, and no mistake. Us don't want no abomination nor witchcraft here. The fat and the Devil's message they be burnt, and gone, as much as old Bola's treasure. I wudn't have messed my leg with a witch's unguent was I paid ever so nor larruped to a cart-tail, I tell 'ee I wudn't!" And then, without more ado, the lovers left the garden and wandered back across the peaceful fields towards the thatched cottage on Benthall Edge.

As Rowland kissed Madge before parting he whispered lovingly, "I'll clot my ears with sheep's wul rather than hear *her* call, and ropes of iron shan't drag me to her feet. Them as loves lives in a strong tower; for love, my dear, is a great defence."

THE STRANGE KNIFE

Two months later, one sultry night in August, Richard Benthall of Benthall paced up and down impatiently a trim path in his garden. He was much agitated, and in spite of the lateness of the hour was evidently expecting some one. He took out his gold repeater and held it to his ear.

"She must come," he said, "she will come, I know. Once she would have walked across God's earth for my sake ; but that is past, and all that now unites us is her love for her child—my son. Well, let what is past rest. Heaven knows I sinned, but I have suffered. Nothing has prospered since I gave her up. A loveless marriage with a dull, commonplace woman, who neither pleased my eye nor interested my heart, and then, to end all pride and interest in my life, my son's death in a skirmish with the French. Paul was the one being who made life possible for me. He at least threw some sunshine into my sombre existence. But now I am without kith or kin ; all gone, all dead, and my days are days of weariness and sorrow that I pass in this old house and

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

garden, without hope, without interest, without any pleasure. I will hear what she has to say. Who knows? perhaps her proposal might bring back some sunshine or interest. It might be well to possess again a son, and to feel that I had still a tie left. Who knows?" And he sighed heavily. "I am a weary, heart-broken man, prematurely aged, wretched, and suffering from a mortal disease. All the joys and delights of life have long since left me. The time was, when I thought to have parted from Kate Havelock, even for a day, would have been hardly preferable to death. What so strange as our past selves? Nothing, save perhaps our old loves." And the Squire gave vent to a long low mirthless laughter.

He passed the old sundial and stopped before it. "I record but happy hours," ran the inscription on the gnomon. The moon shone forth brilliantly, and flashed a sheet of silver radiance upon the words.

"You lie!" cried Richard, and turned savagely away.

A minute later and the gate from the meadow was opened noiselessly, and a woman, tall and dark, and of a lofty presence, stood before him.

"I have come," she said abruptly.

Kate Havelock, for it was she, was very pale, and her face in the rays of the moon looked almost ghastly. "I have come," she repeated, in her

THE STRANGE KNIFE

strange musical voice, "to save you by giving you back your son." And she looked at him searchingly. Her voice was soft with the modulations of some wild bird, and had in it the fantastic harmony of some old Spanish madrigal heard for the first time in the mystery of night.

"What do you want of me?" asked the Squire.
"I wronged you once. I am penitent."

"Speak not of me or of my wrongs," broke from Kate passionately; and as she spoke she tossed back her head and a shower of sable locks fell in rich masses below her waist. "I have done with pleasure and pain—done with all, save as it concerns him. God knows, Richard," she exclaimed, "I considered myself to be your wife, yet you betrayed and deserted me—your cold heart could not stand the laughter of friends or the sneers of relations. In time I got to know you as you really were, pleasant to the eye, but mean and poor in thought and action. Our marriage took place in a room instead of a church, but I did not think at the time it was of less value on that account. But why rake up old memories? All is over; you renounced me, your true wife, to make a loveless marriage, and I struggled on and slaved for the child—"

He moved towards her, an expression of remorse on his face.

"No words, no apologies!" she exclaimed

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

fiercely ; and her voice broke into wild discord, and ended with a crash as of some broken instrument.

"My heart is as dead as yours," she wailed, "and no power can fan the dead ashes into life. I do not hate you, I despise you."

She stood before him in splendid scorn, tall, stately, and her eyes blazing with magnificent fury.

"Hear me," at last said Richard, feebly, "I will tell you what I will do, only do not recall painful things that are over. Fate was against us. You were not, Kate, one of my world, as the saying is. My mother was wild to part us, and at last succeeded in doing so. I put faith in her stories, and the forged letters excited my fury. I know now that the tales told concerning you and my friend Brampton were calumnies invented by malice and hatched by a vindictive woman. I have offered you wealth, every luxury, but marry you I cannot. I am a solitary man, a misanthrope and from habit a recluse, with only a few more years to live. But I will do you justice under certain conditions."

"Name them," murmured Kate ; "I listen." And she stood calm, collected, and cold as a pillar of marble.

He spoke again. "If I recognise him he cannot come here as your son, but must appear in the

THE STRANGE KNIFE

character of a nephew—one of my sister Carrie's sons from America."

"I have not revealed to him his origin," said Kate. "He knows nothing, but looks at me askance. I saw him yesterday along the lane; I talked to him, and told him that I could help him to a great position and to high fortunes if he would but listen to me and be guided by me; but no colt was ever shyer of the bridle than Rowland was of my voice. He passed me with a scowl, and told me he would have none of any witch's devilry, and when I tried to stop him, and to take hold of his hand, he flung me rudely aside, and fled over the fields as if I had had the plague."

"He'll get over that," said Richard cynically; "few men hate man or woman who can be of use of them. Virtue gilded by wealth is a pleasant path to tread."

But here Kate interrupted him. "Rowland fears and doubts me," she said, "and I who love him better than my soul can hardly find words to speak to him in. Before his frank gaze I stammer and become timid as a little child. Love makes us all fools, old and young;" and she laughed softly to herself and her eyes grew sweet and tender.

"Never fear," replied the Squire carelessly; "you will persuade him to think what you wish; you have not Spanish and gipsy blood for nothing in your veins. Besides which, you know the

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

gipsies' arts and their magic ; and tricks will readily get a hold in a rustic's brain."

"Their magic may serve my purpose," said Kate gravely. "I lived with them for long years. When you left me I thought my heart would break ; I sought my aunt, but she believed the worst, and refused to allow me to find a shelter under her roof for myself and my babe. One short year before," she pursued dreamily, "and all the world went gaily with me like a summer's day. Ah ! those were days of sunshine when you rode and talked to me, and I leant out of the old stone gazebo to hear your greeting. What was it men called me ? " Her face, which was singularly mobile, changed as she spoke, and it seemed suddenly as if she was almost transfigured in a radiance of youth and beauty. "Ah ! I remember," and she laughed softly to herself, "The Lily of Ludlow." Then a quick change overspread her face. "But all that is gone—gone and dead, done with like the snow of last winter, like the butterflies that sucked the flowers of your parterres in the sunlight of last summer—all dead and done with—and I care for nothing but the young life. I hope for nothing but for him. What am I," she asked fiercely, "but a poor broken-hearted woman, of ill fame and of lost reputation? yet for his sake," and again her tones grew hushed and sweet as if under some

THE STRANGE KNIFE

mystic influence, "what is there I would not do?"

"I will do him justice," said Richard after a pause ; "but no one must know. I cannot face a scandal. I have nephews in America. He, Rowland, must receive instruction, learn how to speak as a gentleman, and behave as a being of culture, and then he can come here, but not till he has acquired the manners and habits of a man of good society. When the change is accomplished, he shall stay here as my guest. The county must never guess the truth. I will prepare the way by speaking of my American nephew ; but there must be no tattling of idle or wanton tongues. No gross stories raked up of what has been. Dost understand me, woman?" And Richard glanced at his companion sternly.

"I understand," came back her answer. "Don't spare me ; as I said, I care for nothing about myself."

"Think you," said Richard with cruel emphasis, "that you could still reform, and turn saint in your old age ?"

"And if I did," replied Kate with a clouded brow, "would the change be thanks to you ? What have you ever done for me but ruin me, ruin me body and soul ? When first I met you I was as pure in heart as fair of form. I thought our marriage a true one. I was mistaken, the priest was

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

no other than your drunken valet in disguise, whilst as to your mother and your cousin, as I then believed them to be, I learnt who they were later—friends and equals of your drunken knave. Honour and decency you had none. For myself I ask for nothing, and I will have nothing, but you shall give all that wealth can give to him as an expiation of your sin. My Rowland shall learn the ways of fashion. He shall learn how to ride, and dance with grace and ease, and how to use his sword as a gentleman should. I will take him away to London, where the best of teachers and masters can be got, and he shall return to Benthall as your accomplished nephew, a credit to your family, and the gayest prettiest spark in the county.” And suddenly out of her face all anger and hatred died, and Kate laughed aloud joyously.

“How will you tame your wild stag of the woods,” asked Richard, “since he will meet none of your advances, and even flies at your approach? It is an old saying, Kate, ‘First catch your hare.’”

“You speak,” answered his companion, “with the ignorance of a Gorgio. There is real magic, none know that better than a witch, and I will avail myself of it. Few have the gift; but to the chosen it is given to lure the spirit of others and to sweep away by will all prejudices, dislikes, even hatred, by a stronger power, that of attraction. I

THE STRANGE KNIFE

will call him, call him with the spirit of love, and he will come. I will make my son go into a trance, and then make him dream what I ordain, and the affection with which he regards the low-born girl with whom he is now enamoured will fade by my dictation from his vision like a half-forgotten memory of long ago—like a withered flower that is cast away on the roadside and left to perish."

It was curious that Kate showed no pity for the other woman's love, but the witch was a slave to ambition for her son's future. She loved Rowland, and longed to feel proud of him, and in the furtherance of her plans was ruthless about all that interfered with her, or that blocked her path in attaining her objects.

"Rowland must wed in his new world," she continued. "The fairest, high-born maiden in the county will not be too good for him."

Then she became silent, wrapt as it were in a dream of ecstasy. The moonbeams fell full upon her perfect features, and lit up her wan face with a smile of triumph.

"As you will, but I repeat there must be no clamour from idle tongues," said Richard hoarsely. "If the boy can be educated, trained, and turned into a pretty fellow, with the grand air and the ways and manners of a man of rank, good ; if not, go your way, and let him go his, but return here no more, and let me die in peace."

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Kate Havelock turned, looked at her former lover searchingly with her terrible grey eyes, and said solemnly, "As you have spoken, so shall it be." Then she wrapt her long dark mantle around her, enclosed her long hair in her hood, and so left the Squire.

With light elastic tread, peculiar to women of Spanish blood or to nomadic races, Kate trod the paths that led to the meadows, and so over a line of hills to Wyke. A slight breeze stirred amongst the tree-tops, but Kate paid no heed to the white-faced cattle which looked up at her astonished to gaze at her as she went by, nor did the brown dim sheep who huddled together at her approach receive more attention from her. She walked straight on. She never slackened her pace, or paused to look to right or left, until she came to Priss Morris's cottage wicket. Then like lightning she stopped, and removed her shoes, and walked barefoot, and noiselessly up the pebbled path, or causeway, as folks call it in Shropshire. All was still ; nothing was moving save a branch of an apple tree, which beat up and down against the low wall of the garden softly in rhythmic cadence.

Kate neared the little dwelling-house, and laid her hand in silence upon the door. Then, after a minute, she sat down, but never a word escaped her lips. After a few moments a strange change

THE STRANGE KNIFE

seemed to come over her. Her face became the colour of death, her eyes grew glazed and lifeless, and her hands became grey and numbed. For some time she lay as one in a trance. Suddenly across the east appeared the first streaks of the chill dawn. Then, with a feeble cry, she awoke. As she rose Kate looked shrunken, and but half her natural size. Drops of perspiration ran down her brow and cheeks, and she seemed almost overcome by weakness, for in striving to get up she nearly lost her balance, and tottered backwards. Above, in the little bed-chamber over her head, she heard some one moaning as if in pain, but the sound seemed hardly to proceed from human lips, feeble, faint, and incoherent, it rose more like the cry of some entrapped beast than the wail of a man.

“ My poor darling!” murmured the witch. “ But, alas! he must suffer; it is the only way; ” and, thus speaking, she retraced her steps to Sherlot, bearing in her hands her shoes, so as to make no noise.

A few minutes later and the lattice window of the cottage was thrown violently open, and Rowland, gasping for breath, leant out, almost falling in his terror into the garden below. His face was ashen grey, and he seemed unnerved by some strange and inexplicable terror. “ My God, my God,” he cried, “ have pity on my soul! ”

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

For a long while he lay upon the sill, gasping and half unconscious, and in great danger of falling head foremost into the garden. Gradually his senses returned to him. "Was it a dream, or a real call?" he asked himself at length; but he felt sick to death. That day, some hours afterwards when he sat at breakfast, he still felt faint and ill, and could eat no food.

"What's up now, man?" asked old Priss. "Thee looks as if thee had crossed Death in some crooked street, or met a witch. Thou hast no eye for thy victuals, and thy hand shakes same as an aspen leaf in an aftermath breeze."

"'Tis nought," replied Rowland moodily. "Be-like thou hast put somethin' wrong, toadstoolish or fly-blown, into the pot last night, for thee is allus buyin' odds and fragments from they as shouldn't come by such. I feel anyway as if I had a fire inside me, and my tongue burrs to my mouth same as if I had been harvesting night and day in burning fields with never a drop to drink."

"Thou art as white and frousty," replied the crone, "as a woman what's had a sick wean and hasn't been between decent sheets for a week. But tell me, lad," she added curiously, "what be thy ailment?"

"What for dost thee want to know?" inquired Rowland gruffly. "Like enough if I told thee thou wud be flitting over to her as rides on a devil's

THE STRANGE KNIFE

besom at night and that lives at Sherlot. I tell thee, woman, I have been overlooked!"

"Overlooked! and by whom, honey?" asked Mother Morris, with a chuckle. "Thou art a delicate lad. Now if thou wert wise thou wudn't fight that hard. There's some as wud do with thy luck. Men say as Kate has rooms of treasure stowed away, and all of her own, in the great wood, and if that b'aint enough, that she has the true key to Ippekin's cave. Let her be, and she'll mak' a gentleman of thee right and proper. Why, then," she continued, after a pause, "bounce and flout her as if thou wert a bull in the ring? She has a fancy for thee, fool. Humour the witch. 'Tis nought but a green-horn that can't eat the butter that's put on his bread."

"Thou hast had a finger in the pie!" thundered Rowland, bringing his fist down heavily on the kitchen table, and his face white with passion. "By Heaven! if I thought so I'd never darken thy doors again."

"What folly be this?" screamed Priss, who did not at all relish losing Rowland as a lodger. "What should I have to do with witches or their charms—I, a poor aged widow—as lives alone and meddles with nobody. But this I do hold, that thou makest much cry and gainest little wool, as the devil said when he sheared the sow."

"Hold thy peace; no light words to me,"

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

shouted Rowland, in a frenzy of rage. "I tell thee, thou weazen crone, last night I went to hell, and the very air I breathed weighed down upon me like a lithermon's load, and the whole place seemed choked with demons. I called and called, but I couldn't get no words out, and I seemed to be talking in a foreign tongue, as I cudn't understand myself. I'll see Parson, and I'll try and speak to 'un. There's witch-lore and devilry in the matter, or I wudn't have lain as I did with my heart throbbing like a sledge-hammer again my mortal ribs, and a deathly damp pouring away from me like a marsh spring after February rains; and I'll tell thee what it be," he added, looking at the old woman intently, "the heler (receiver) is as bad as the heaver (thief), and neither shall find mercy with me."

Old Priss began to shake with fear, but after a moment or two regained her composure. "Thee had best go out," she said sullenly, "since thee cannot eat like a Christian. Go about thy business, 'twill ease thy brain."

Rowland did not reply, but looked at her as in a dream, and went out.

All that day he seemed absent-minded and absorbed in some outside interest. Old Jan Mills, farmer Robinson's foreman, chaffed him continually. "Thee looks fair mazed, man. What be it? Thee seems as if thee had drunk a love



Photo by Frith.

RUINS OF THE ABBEY CHURCH, MUCH WENLOCK.

1

THE STRANGE KNIFE

philtre, or had been somehow charmed. I shouldn't, I know, want any love philtre if I had gained pretty Madge Jakes' heart. That wud do for me," and he laughed loud and good-naturedly ; "but there, that 'ull do, turn to and get the beasts in the cart, and let's load up the muck for the pasture t'other side of the steadings."

Rowland gave no explanation to Jan, or to his other companions of what he had felt the preceding night. A great terror tied his tongue, and he dreaded if he told his dream a shower of rough and boisterous jibes would be levelled at him.

As Rowland returned home that evening from his work he paused, and sat down on a stile and looked at the beautiful panorama that lay before him, of verdant meadows and woods, and far away the sleepy town of Much Wenlock, with its faint blue smoke dimmed by the distance, a glorious amber radiance resting on the far hills.

"This be a fair place to live in," murmured Rowland, "and yet it is borne in upon me it cannot long be my home."

Faint and ill he tried to resolve upon a course of action to pursue.

"Well," he said at last, "the best thing as I can do is to see Parson ; he's wonderful kind and pitersome, and knows on many devil-dodges. Perhaps he could draw me out of this hole."

It was curious that the poor lad never once

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

thought of consulting Madge, but he felt sadly weary and worn, and as a little child groping in the dark.

"That 'ull be the best job," he said to himself, and so saying swung off the stile.

Suddenly, coming down the lane he heard the flutter of a woman's dress, and looking up Rowland saw Madge standing before him ; but not Madge strong and joyous as of old, happy and conscious of her charms, but Madge tear-stricken, worried, and trembling.

"Oh lad," she cried, "what be this ? They say at the farm as thee was all strange and heavy-heeled to-day, mazed, and meäking (lethargic), and that thee went about thy jobs, old Jan says, same as a mawkin. Mother her sent a dish of apples to mistress Robinson from our garden, and as I passed the stack I seed old Jan, and he clapt me on thy track. 'There's only love as can save a lad like that,' said the old man, kind and gentle like. 'Find the boy and make 'un speak. Rowland hadn't a word to say, but stood about dull and foolish same as a tired tit as can barely crawl back from market.' Oh, lad, what be thy sorrow ?" she inquired tenderly, for Rowland was sobbing like a little child. Madge ran to him and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

Then Rowland stammered forth a string of incoherent words. "Her'll get me, lass, her'll get

THE STRANGE KNIFE

me sure enough. I feel as if her spells was a-tieing me down, and I know with such as she, I've as little chance as one of farmer Robinson's oxes have when butcher Makin comes for 'un."

Then Madge out of her love gave him comfort. "Don't 'ee take her wickedness that serious to heart, my dear," she said. "There's right ways of holding to things, and they be as strong as bad ones ; but, lad, yer must lay to and hold the faith. 'Tis a rousing hope that 'ull save thee. Now swear, man, that thee wull let nothing come a'tween us. I'll wait for thee and work for thee, for we've a known each other and played with each other," she said, with tender tears starting to her eyes, "ever since we war childers, and believe me, dear, one night of spell sayin' or charm cryin' can't undo the work of years, and old love and happy thoughts can't all fly away in a twinkling. Look up, my man, and take my hand. I'm by thee, thy Madge, thy own true lass, as wull give thee good words and honest counsel, for I love thee, dear, I love thee."

Gradually her sympathy and bravery bore effect. "Oh lass !" he murmured, "thee does me pounds of good. Thee's like a flood of sunshine at Christmastide. 'Tis somethin' to have thee with me though all the world be agin me," and he kissed her gratefully.

"Wilt thee come back and sup with us ? " at last

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

suggested Madge. “ Father be away, but mother and I will sing to thee a merry catch, ‘ Old Davey Brown,’ and ‘ Hang the branches round the hearth.’ Thou canst join in the choruses, and belike by night time we’ll have thee spruce and spunky, and as cheery as a throstle of an April morn.”

“ Thee puts strength into me, my maid,” replied Rowland. “ Hold on to my hand, dear. I feel as if thy touch were like Farmer Robinson’s best ale afore the last cut.”

“ Ah, thee’s better now,” said Madge, smiling through her tears ; “ and sure,” she added bravely, “ a lass as keeps her pecker up be worth good meat to a lad.”

“ Good meat !” said Rowland hotly, “ she be worth meat and drink, for she be the life of his soul, my pretty ; ” and so hand in hand the lovers walked across the meadows and supped together right joyously at the thatched cottage on Benthall Edge, and a merry evening they had of it.

Madge’s mother, Dame Jakes, sang right lustily ; and if there was but little harmony in her ditties there was great enjoyment, and all went as gaily as a peal of marriage bells, according to the common saying, and Rowland whispered on the threshold of the house as he left his love, “ Dear life, thou hast made a man of me ; ” and he strode away a dim figure amongst the dim shadows.

THE STRANGE KNIFE

Mistress Jakes approached her daughter. " My girl," she said, in her clear honest voice, " thou art a good maid, and the Lord will give thee, I mak' no doubt, the richest gifts He can give a maid, a true heart and a strong man."

At hearing herself spoken to by her mother with so much kindness, Madge took her parent's hand and kissed it reverently, saying as she did so, " I thank thee, dear ; thee knows my heart is sore, and thee has comforted both of us."

Then good Dame Jakes set up a joyous laugh. " The Lord," she said, " He gives us merriment besides tears sometimes to right His world with."

Whilst mother and daughter were thus engaged in friendly converse, Rowland rapidly retraced his steps to Priss's cottage.

The old crone had gone to bed, but the key was in the lock, and he found a tallow dip in a tin candlestick to guide him up the stairs. As he mounted the stairs he sang aloud, to give himself confidence one of the choruses of a catch that Dame Jakes had sung so lustily that evening—

" 'Tally ho ! Tally ho ! stick to it, my boys,'
Aloud the huntsman cries,
With a hip, hip, and a hullo,
As through the wood he flies."

" They be jolly wholesome words," ejaculated Rowland. " No harm in fox-hunting ; and if I

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

was one of the quality, wouldn't I top the thorns and leap the gates and stiles, that I wud!" And laughing to himself, the young man went up the creaking stairs and entered his own barely-furnished little chamber.

A few minutes later, worn out with the day's varied emotions, Rowland fell fast asleep.

Some time before his return a woman, tall and lithe, had walked from the depths of Sherlot Forest over the fields, leaving the Marsh Farm on the left, and so from Barrow across to Wyke, skirting Posenhall. With noiseless tread she had awaited her victim's arrival, standing in the shadow of the house. Breathless she had watched Rowland enter the cottage. When she heard him sing the stanza in praise of fox-hunting, she had laughed silently to herself.

"Thou shalt have thy hunters, and thy fast-trotting nags, my son," she had whispered. "Only wait a bit, and thou shalt make as dashing a figure as any young sprig of the nobility. But, my poor lad, I must pain thee first. Yet courage. The pain that I must give thee is like the chirurgeon's knife. It is for thy good, although thou wilt scream in thy agony and terror even as the young recruit screams in fear when the knife is used to sever a mangled limb after battle. Yet must it be."

Kate paused and listened attentively to every

THE STRANGE KNIFE

sound, remaining always in the shade, so that no one who might happen to pass could catch her outline.

"He sleeps at last," she murmured; and with firmly-closed lips and flashing eye she stole across the pavement to the cottage door. Once more she laid her hand upon the panels of the door and muttered strange words of Oriental origin. Then, as the moonbeams bathed her in their silver radiance, she laughed softly to herself.

"My dear one!" she said. "He will understand and forgive me some day—some day;" and, so speaking, she threw herself once more into a trance, as on the previous evening.

This time her sleep was of shorter duration. "The powers of hell are with me," she murmured shuddering, as she recovered consciousness. "Tomorrow he will be mine. The third time he will look into my eyes, and I will lead him home across field and forest, until I have tamed him and made him what my soul and heart craves for."

Kate left, walking hurriedly forth. A fox that was bent upon robbing a neighbouring henroost fled quickly at her approach.

"Friend," she laughed, "why fly when we are both bent upon the same errand—both robbers?"

A little while after the witch had left Priss's garden Rowland awoke. Again instinctively he groped his way to the lattice window and threw it

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

open violently. He gasped for breath like a spent horse after a mighty course and that is almost dying from fatigue. Rowland shook with terror, and his eyes were wild like some insane creature as he ran out into the darkness. He did not stop to dress himself, but hurriedly flung across his shoulders an old shepherd's cloak.

"If aught can save me it be Parson," he repeated madly. "He harn't practised for nothin' all these forty years how to rout the devil. Surely if I can see him some good word will fall from 'un, and somehow he will scare the witch."

Over the fields, still lying dim and black in the darkness of night, Rowland fled. He ran at a breakneck pace, leaping a stile here, and clambering over a gate rather than stop, to open it. A cold autumn wind blew across the meadows and stirred his hair, but he took no heed.

"If only I can git to 'un," he murmured, with haggard face and tremulous voice. "If not I pray God I may soon die in a ditch."

At last he reached the little parsonage. Roughly he seized the trim brass knocker that hung upon the neatly painted door and beat with it furiously. For a long time there came no answer; but at last an aged woman, bent, shrivelled and weazened, poked her head out of an upper window, and demanded the intruder's business.

"What be up to," she cried out in a shrill tone,

THE STRANGE KNIFE

"disturbing honest folk's rest at this time of night?"

"I want to see Parson, I must see Parson," cried out Rowland.

"Thee must! Thee wants! Fine words for a plough-in-the-muck clodhopper! Thee talks like a young duke. Since when, I'd like to know, do us hear of want and must, when huffle-heeled chaw-bacons be the talkers?"

Rowland, undaunted by the fury of her reproof, called out sternly, "Woman, I tell thee I must and will see thy master. He must do for me God's work. Only open the door and I mak' no doubt as his reverence will see me through with it, for I have much to say, and it be hardly after midnight, and however weary he be, Parson is not one to leave out a poor fellow alone in his misery."

"Pshaw!" rejoined the old housekeeper, Peg Marsden, "thou silly varlet, thy impudence would drive a younger woman mazed; but I know thee for what thou art, a silly daft muddler! Get back to thy bed, instead of scaring sober folks as wish to be in theirs, and keep thy megrims and fal-de-rols for thy lass, or such as wish to hear thee at village pot-house."

At this Rowland only continued to beat furiously against the door.

"Stop thy demons' riot, and crazy bellocks

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

(roars)" called out Peg. "Ah! If I had my way thee shouldst have a dozen at the cart tail and cool thy brain and feet in Wenlock Stocks." Then, keeping her real news, like a true woman, for the ending of her interview, she cried out: "Know, man, that master's away, and none, not even the Squire, can see him till Thursday night. So have done with thy knockin's and clamours. Thou art yellin', and howlin', keeping up a keoup like a mastiff pup as has been put on the chain for the first time;" and with a bang she fastened the window.

"Thy master is away!" groaned Rowland; and with a sense of terrible disappointment he called out, "Oh! woman, woman, thou doesn't know what that means to me;" and then, without another word, he retraced his steps.

For some time Rowland stood outside Priss Morris' garden. "The place has a devil," he murmured to himself; but the fear of being seen and ridiculed by some of his companions who might happen to pass at last prevailed over him; and so, trembling, he once more mounted the stairs and went into his chamber. When he got into the room, however, he left both the door and window open, "to let the devil pass," as he expressed it.

Rowland's cheeks were ashen, and his eyes dull, and listless at the breakfast hour. Priss did

THE STRANGE KNIFE

not, however, allude to his changed appearance, for, to use her own language, Kate the preceding evening "had crossed her palm like a born lady with a silver piece, and had promised a gold coin if only she would hold her peace."

"When all goes well, and the lad is mine safe and tight," Kate had said, "thou shalt have a rich reward. I am not stingy, old mother, for all I am a witch ;" and here Kate had glared at her out of her terrible eyes in a way that had made the old crone feel, as she afterwards told a gossip, "as if her body had all turned to goose flesh in a jump, and as if a thousand devils had speered over her shoulder at once."

Rowland sat at the table, but his food remained untouched.

"I canna eat nothin'," he said at last. "Sick I be to die, oh if thee has any kindness for me let 'em know at the farm as I be took ill, and I'll bide with thee at the chimney corner. I dursn't go out, the wind fair seems to cut me with a knife."

At this remark Priss nodded her old head and puckered up her old face in fresh wrinkles, and as she left the cottage croaked out, "I'll do thy bidding."

Left to himself Rowland sat all the morning looking blankly into the fire. Faces seemed to appear to him and voices to whisper out of the

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

flames. The day began cold and damp, but later on the heavy pall of leaden sky was brightened by gleams of sunshine. Rowland looked up and saw a bright light playing upon the little flower border, and tempted by the radiance outside caught up his cap and sauntered forth. With a sense of returning comfort he walked along the road and peered over the hedge-row. In the distance Rowland saw his team, a bay, a roan, and a chestnut, ploughing up a steep field hard by. He heard the crack of the whip, and for a moment a wild desire seized him to take the ploughshares out of Abel Mustard's hands. "He was ever a bungler was Abel ;" and he cried out pettishly, "He never knows how to get round the mettlesome side of Fanny." Then suddenly, conscious of his own weakness, his heart failed him. "I haven't the mortal strength," he moaned, and turned back wearily, leaning heavily on his stick.

Rowland flung himself on a stool by the fire. "God Almighty !" he murmured, "my head ! my head !" And he tied an old red handkerchief round his hair, and rocked himself backwards and forwards as one in pain.

Later on when Priss came in she found him quieter and apparently dozing before the fire. She looked at him attentively. "He's witch-mazed," she muttered to herself, "if ever a lad

THE STRANGE KNIFE

war, but 'tis lucky I war able to put by his sweet-heart," she added cunningly; "I met Madge in the lane and I told her as Rowland had gone along with Farmer Robinson to bring back a mare and nobby (foal) from Judson's men;" the old woman chuckled, and added, "I had but to say, 'Thee knows his way with beasts, lass, the master says as there's none like 'im with a rampageous brute,' and her never doubted me, did Madge, more than a lamb does the butcher;" and the old crone beamed exultantly as she stirred up the mess in the black pot, and laughed shrilly.

Then she turned to Rowland, who remained sitting idly, huddled up in a heap, his eyes buried in the fire. "Thee looks desperate mawmsey (sleepy), lad," she said; "thee will not be right till thee's pool'd 'tween the sheet agin."

Rowland did not answer at once, but called out after a minute for a drink.

"I'll give thee a sup of beer," she answered, "but get thee to thy bed. 'Tis the proper place for sick folks."

Then Rowland got up with a despairing gesture. "I haven't nobody," he murmured, and went tottering up the stairs.

"Lor!" said Priss meditatively, "I thought as the lad wud have had more spunk in 'im, but he's as linnow as a glove. She'll do with 'un what her

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

wants. Her be so lithe, lissom and cunning, be Kate, her'll turn 'un where her will, the poor lobber-ze-loy ;" and the old woman frisked about her kitchen, singing, in high cracked tones :

“ Her begged for love he'd be her swain,
But merrily croaks the crow, O ! ”

“ Anyway,” she continued, “ 'tis no job of mine. I'll let be, for there's allus mammocks (fragments) in witch's work.”

After a while Priss sat down on a stool before the fire. “ He have a forgot the beer,” she chuckled. “ Well, water will do as well, and that he'll find by the witch's spring when 'e gets there, and plenty.” Then she laid her table, and afterwards sat down and made a hearty meal, tearing the meat off the bones with her yellow fangs like some wild famished beast.

Suddenly the house seemed filled with sounds. They seemed to come and go with the breeze. It was not like a human voice, but seemed rather the soul of the wind calling and calling. Even Priss got up uneasily and walked about.

“ I don't hold to they devil's hymns,” she said. “ They gits hold on you like rheumatics, and yer don't know how or where.”

The wind seemed to mix with the voice and the voice with the wind. Was the witch singing ?

Priss's curiosity prevailed over her fears, and she

THE STRANGE KNIFE

pushed aside some plants in pots and looked out through the lattice pane. Without warning the thrush in the wicker cage gave a faint unearthly cry, and in mad terror beat itself against the bars of its tenement, and then fell heavily on the floor and died. On went the crying of the wind and voice, insidious, sweet and cruel, with echoes of far off tenderness and mad regret. The sound seemed to run round and round the house and filled even old Priss with strange longings.

As she afterwards expressed it, "it made her feel, old and spindly as she war, almost young again, it made her think on May mornings and of her little cripple sister that she hadn't seen these sixty years and more, and that lay buried in Much Wenlock churchyard. It war queer and curious, and somehow seemed the inside of things long since forgotten." Then at last the sound died away, and nothing remained but the stirring of the wind amongst the tree-tops.

With a firm hand the top of the latch was pressed down, and Kate, tall and erect, stood before the old woman. "Out," she hissed, "or never a coin of mine shalt thou see, thou yellow, parchment-faced slut! I will have no witnesses."

Priss quailed before her terrible gaze, and mute sought her own bedchamber.

Then Kate poked the fire into a fierce blaze. "He shall come down here," she said, and willed

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

that Rowland should do so. Silently an inner door was opened, and the sound of footsteps was heard descending the stairs.

Kate rose and awaited Rowland's approach. Feebly he advanced towards her like some wounded bird, his arms stretched out, his eyes wide open, but visionless, and on his face an expression of a lost soul, something coarse, degraded and sensual.

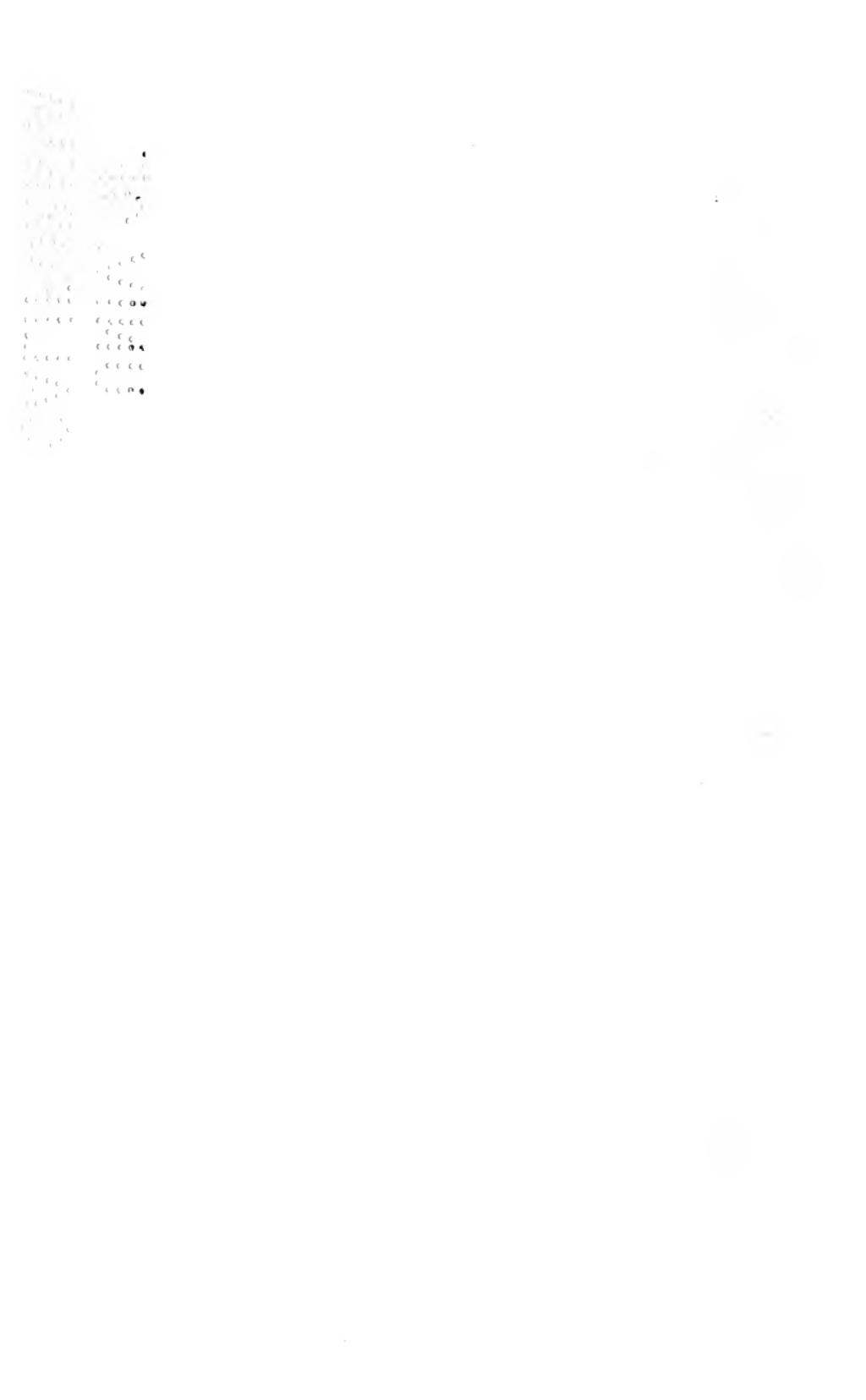
"God grant I have not lost him body and soul!" burst from the witch's lips. "But it is too late now to draw back." Then she flung a cloak over the young man's shoulders, and placing one hand on one of his led him forth. She murmured something into his ear, upon which he fell a laughing like a drunkard; but at this she paid small attention, only saying, "To-morrow, my bonny boy, you shall awake and know what life can be."

Over plough and field, across moorland waste, and through the depth of Sherlot Forest, she guided him, holding him always firmly by one hand, lest the charm should break, until they came to her lonely cottage. As the witch pushed open the door a flock of cats came forward and purred loudly round her feet. "Hence, children!" she cried, and they leaped out into the darkness mewing.

Then she made Rowland lie down on a couch



SHERLOV FOREST.



THE STRANGE KNIFE

of fern, and passed her hands in a strange, dazzling fashion before his eyes. "Sleep! sleep!" she said authoritatively. In a few moments Rowland's head fell back, and there was no sound but of his laboured breathing. She watched him tenderly, a gentle smile playing on her lips, after which she placed food and drink by his side, and softly closed the door behind her. For one minute she stood on the threshold. "I will let him sleep, poor lad; he's ill and weary," she said; "but later he shall know all, and that he is my son. It was worth doing, in spite of all the horror and terror." Then she paused, and gazing at him attentively through her window, whispered, "After this nothing but love!" and so saying glided into the shadows of the dark forest.

Rowland slept on for many hours, a heavy, restless sleep, in which he often moaned and groaned as one in pain. At last he rolled violently over from his couch and awoke. The first thing he felt was a wild, maddening thirst. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth, and a strange prickling heat seemed to pervade the whole of his body. It was now full daylight, and seeing the food and drink placed near him, Rowland drank eagerly from the cup.

He looked round half dazed by the strangeness of his surroundings. At first he could not understand how he had got there, but after a little while

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

a faint recollection of part of what had occurred returned to him. "I am in the witch's den," he cried, starting up, and a cold perspiration burst out upon his brow.

He ran round the room, but could find no means of egress. The little window was barred, and the door, a very heavy one, locked, and the key removed. Rowland tried to mount the stairs, but an inner door which led to them was also locked, and he found it too strong to break through. Then he sat down upon the couch white with terror, and thought of how best he could effect his escape. Suddenly, as he was trying to hit upon some scheme of deliverance, his eye fell upon the knife which the witch had laid upon the platter with some meat and bread. As the young man looked at it his eyes gleamed with fury. "There be one way," he muttered, "and that will do the job." As he spoke he took up the knife and handled it gently. It was a strange, weird-looking thing, very long in the blade, and very sharp, with a red iridescent handle, on which were let in, in curious brass workmanship, the form of a crescent moon, and stars above. "Yes," murmured Rowland, "it is my only way. It must be to the death for my girl."

In the dusk the witch returned. As Rowland heard the key turn in the lock he seized hold of the knife firmly in his hand. A minute later and

THE STRANGE KNIFE

she entered. A look of triumph blazed in her eyes.

"How art thou, my lad?" she asked, in her rich Southern voice. Then, drawing close to him, she added, "I have thought of nought but thee. Do not fear me," for she noticed the look of repulsion on his face, "I will do thee nothing but kindness."

"Let me go!" cried Rowland darkly. "Let me go, I say, or, devil as thou art, I'll do for thee."

Then Kate tried to hold him, and laughed tenderly, as mothers are wont to do at wilful children, and sought to put her arms round, and to draw him gently to her.

With a stifled cry of horror Rowland sought to free himself. "None of that! none of that!" he exclaimed, "I have my own sweet sweetheart."

But Kate clung to him tight. She was a strong woman, of great height. "Thee must let me kiss thee first, dear," she whispered.

For all answer Rowland stopped, and holding the knife behind his back cried out again in a voice of terrible passion, "Let me go, I say, let me go!"

At this Kate laughed and retorted, smiling, "Lad, I have got thee, and I'll keep thee."

Then Rowland, seized with mad fury, lifted high the hand in which he had concealed the knife, and stabbed the woman before him three times. Kate

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

fell with a groan, and then lay quite still, her beautiful white face gleaming like marble in the fire-light. After a pause Rowland stooped down and found the key in the witch's pocket. He drew it forth, but very carefully, for he dreaded above all, as country folks still do, to be touched by witch's blood. A minute later and he had unlocked the door and flung the knife into the wood. As the door opened he was conscious of a flock of fury creatures passing him with a rushing mewing sound. But to their cries he paid no attention.

Free once more, Rowland felt at first only a wild throb of joyous exultation. "Her as I hate is dead, and I am free!" he cried, but a little further on he realised that what he had done was nothing less than murder. "I'd best give myself up;" he said, "I was driven to it, and there was no one to help me." So he sought Squire Bent-hall.

It was dark when Rowland reached the old Hall.

"What's up, lad?" cried the old butler, Sampson, who knew him, as he entered the back door. "Thee looks all of a flutter, as if thee had seen a ghost."

"I have killed the witch, and must tell the Squire."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the old butler. "Couldn't thee have found some one else, that thee

THE STRANGE KNIFE

must be ruined body and soul?" And he led him to his master's study.

"What's this?" asked Richard angrily as he looked up from his book, "and who hast thou brought here?"

In reply the old butler mumbled and stammered out something about Rowland Ryder "that had killed the witch."

"Killed the witch!" cried Richard, starting up. Then he said to his old servant, "Leave us; I must speak to this fellow alone."

When the old man had left the room the Squire turned to Rowland. "Unhappy boy!" he exclaimed. "Thou hast murdered thy mother. She sought but to take thee away from thy base employment and to make a gentleman of thee. As an officer of justice I must take down thy story." Then he hastily took down the evidence as Rowland told it.

At the end of the story Richard turned to the young man and inquired, "Why wouldst not thou let the witch embrace thee?"

To which Rowland replied, "I knew nought of who she was, and I had my own sweetheart, your honour—Madge Jakes, the daughter of your gardener, and I was fixed on none separating us from each other."

At hearing this Richard's eyes gleamed with rage, but he spoke calmly. "If I were to help

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

thee to escape would nothing make thee give up the maid?"

"Nothin'," answered Rowland fervently. "Her has been my good spirit, and I'll stick to her what ever mountains roll my way—through fire and water."

"Then I'll do my duty," cried Richard rising; and ringing the bell he ordered his lacqueys to secure Rowland's person.

The next morning the Squire sent for Jakes, the old gardener of the Hall. "Jakes," he said severely, "thou and thy family must go. Thou hast heard of the murder of the witch? Thy daughter was the cause of young Ryder's hatred. There will be a terrible scandal, and I will have no one round me that has had anything to do with it."

The old man tried to plead something in his defence, but words would not come. All he could utter was, "It wull kill me, it wull kill me, for I can never grow new hedges elsewhere, nor make fresh lawns." He returned to his cottage a broken man, and died a few days afterwards.

As to pretty Madge, the story runs that her lover escaped the gallows by the help of some well-to-do friends, such as Farmer Robinson and others, and that she married him some years later in one of the new settlements in America. At least, so the story is still told at Wyke and Much Wenlock. But old Priss Morris never got her

THE STRANGE KNIFE

promised gold, which was to her a cause of much angry disappointment. "Witches be like vipers," she was wont to say, "but sometimes like vipers they stings theirselves, as that there Kate of Sherlot found when her tried to play the Maytide loseller (idler) with young Rowland Ryder, and got death for her wages."

LIST OF OLD SHROPSHIRE WORDS

Afore, before

Aftermath, second growth of grass

Ale-hoof, ground-ivy, used once as a remedy for sciatica

Aunty-praunty, high spirited

Bash, to knock about

Bellock, to bellow, to roar

Besmoter, to smear or daub

Billy-hooter, common owl

Bishopped, confirmed

Bobish, gay, bright

Broggil, angry squabble

Brouse, the trimming of hedges

Buck-wesh, a large wash of common linen

Buck-lee, a compound of wood ashes used in washing coarse linen

Bulge, to knock in

Cakey, foolish, silly

Can-doughs, breakfast cakes

Canile, a can full

Cater-cornelled, out of shape

Causey or *causeway*, paved footpath

Chag, a branch of broom or gorse

Chapman, a buyer

Chapmoney, money given back by the seller for luck

Chatter-pie, magpie

Chawl, a pig's cheek

LIST OF OLD SHROPSHIRE WORDS

- Childer*, children
Chomble, to gnaw, or nibble
Cheorls, wall-flowers
Clapper-clawed, to scold and abuse
Clary, a ringing cry
Cleach hole, a pool scooped out of a brook to collect water for washing
Cloutering, walking noisily
Clout, a cuff, a blow
- Daffish*, bashful, shy
Daffadowndilly, daffodil
Daggly, showery
Dallop, a heap not measured
Danks, dwarfish
Dang-swang, vigorously
Devil's bedstead, the four of clubs
Devil's currycomb, corn crowsfoot
Devil's posy, broad-leaved garlic
Dimmy-simmy, conceited
Dish washer, the pied water-wagtail
Dog's leave, without permission
Drumble, to dawdle
Drumby hole, a rough woodland dip
Dwine, to waste away
- Ear-apparn*, a gleaner's apron
Easement, relief
Easings sparrows, house sparrows
Ecall, the green woodpecker
Edge of night, twilight
Ess balls, balls made out of wood ashes and used instead of soap ;
they were sold in Shrewsbury during the eighteenth century
Ether's mon, dragon-fly
- Fad about*, to look after things in a quiet way
Faiberry, common gooseberry
Fallal, nonsense
Fidge, a restless person

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Fitchock, hedgehog
Flap-jack, a sort of rough pancake
Flammucky, slovenly
Fly-gang, a band of labourers who did harvesting work by the piece ; the work was superintended by a gaffer or head man

Galeny, guinea fowl
Galloway, a little horse of fourteen hands
Gallows, mischievous, naughty
Gammocks, rough play
Gangrel, lean, gaunt
Gauby, gaby, foolish
Gaup, to gape
Geommocks, shreds, tatters
Glaver, to flatter from self-interest
Glemmy, weather that is bright and showery in turns
Golden chains, blossoms of the laburnums
Goose apple, good cooking apples
Gossips, sponsors in Holy Baptism
Granny-reared, over indulged
Grope, tickle trout with the hand

Hantle, a handful
Hard-yeds, knapweed buds
Hasp, a fastening for the lid of a box
Hat full of feathers, nest of the long-tailed titmouse
Haws, berries of the hawthorn
Hay-tick, common whitethroat
Hen-and-chickens, double garden daisies
Hespel, to worry, or harass
Higgler, buyer
Hobs and gobs, uneven places in fields
Hommacks, to destroy by want of care
Howgy, huge
Huddimuk, to do things on the sly
Huddimukery, to hide away money or treasure in a secret place
Huffle-footed, heavy, clumsy
Hulky, stupid

LIST OF OLD SHROPSHIRE WORDS

Jack Nicol, the goldfinch
Jack squealer, swift
Jack straw, common whitethroat
Jagg of hay, small load of hay
Jagger, one who carts hay
Jarsey, fine combings of wool
Jaunders, jaundice
Jetty, to agree
Johnny-knock-softly, an indolent workman
Johnny-wop-straw, a man who works on a farm
Joram, a big drink
Jowl, to knock
Juffet, to jump and fidget about
Junder, to grumble
Junket, a feast

Kag, a solitary tooth
Katie-bran-tail, the redstart
Keck-handed, awkward and left-handed
Kecke-stomached, squeamish and queasy
Keffel, a sorry, worn-out old horse
Keoup, to whine or bark like a dog on the chain
Kerry, an angry inquiry about anything
Kim-kam, awry, crooked
Kissing bush, mistletoe
Knopple, to rule, to dominate

Lace, to beat, to thrash
Ladies' purses, flowers of the calceolaria
Lady-cow, ladybird
Lady's-smock, common bitter cress
Lady with the ten flounces, a goldfinch
Laggerments, fragments
Lag-last, a loiterer
Lark-heeled, early riser
Larrup, to thrash
Lat-time, backward season
Laughing bird, the green woodpecker
Lay-loc, common lilac

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Light-timbered, small boned

Lonk, groin

Loselling, a good-for-nothing lazy fellow

Love spinning, a spinning-bee

Maise, stinking chamomile

Mak'a mock, to do a thing feebly, not thoroughly

Malkin, a broom to clean the oven

Mommocks, fragments wasted

Marrow, a companion

Meal-mouthed, deceitful.

Mooch, to idle

Morant, moorhen

Morums, grimaces

Naked ladies, autumn crocuses

Nesh, soft, delicate

Nimble tailor, long-tailed titmouse

Nippit, to go quickly

Nobby, a sucking foal

Noggling, bungling

Nook-shotten, having many angles and turns

Noon-spell, a labouring man's luncheon hour

Nose (to) take off the brown blossom on gooseberries or currants
before making them into jam

Nottamy, a thin meagre person

Nunty, handy, convenient

Oak-ball, oak-apple

Oddments, odds and ends

Old-ruffler, ace of spades

Oont, mole

Pearl, brisk, sharp

Pellrollick, a faded worn-out looking woman

Plum-bird, bullfinch

Pouk, a sty on the eye

Prill, a streamlet of clear water

Prosperation, prosperity

Praunting, prancing

LIST OF OLD SHROPSHIRE WORDS

Purgy, conceited

Quail, to fall sick

Quank, quiet, still

Queening, a juicy apple

Quice, the ringdove

Rackle, to make a clattering noise

Raddling, bribing

Randy, a frolic

Raton, young rat

Reasty, rancid

Reechy, dirty, smoky

Rucks an' Yeps, "ducks and drakes," to squander

Sallet, salad

Sammy, close, clammy

Scot, an ale-house score

Scotch gotherum, woollen stuff of coarse texture

Scrammel strammel, a gaunt ill-favoured animal person

Scrat, to scratch

Scrimmer, a niggardly person

Scrimmity, mean, stingy

Scroodge, to squeeze

Seyney tree, laburnum tree

Shoods, husks of oats

Shoon, shoes

Sidelant Leasow, steep sloping field

Skew-wiff, irregular

Slop-frock, a smock worn by waggoners

Snail-housen, snail shells

Snippet, a small bit

Snowi, to say disagreeable things

Snow-birds, fieldfares

Sobbin-wet, soaked through

Solid, sedate

Sorrowful Monday, the week to labourers that begins again the usual payments and allowances of beer after harvesting

Spittle-tree, the handle of a spade

OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE

Squitch, couch-grass

Sun-suckers, the sun's rays in showery weather

Swopson, big coarse woman

Tallboy, a narrow ale-glass

Tancil, to thrash

Tang, to make a sharp ringing noise

Tantrums, burst of passionate words

Tossicated, harassed, worried

Totty, half drunk

Touzle, to rumple

Tranklements, odds and ends lying about

Trimple, to tread gingerly

Tummy, bread and cheese

Turn-again-gentlemen, turncap lily

Twink, the chaffinch

Twinter, to shrivel

Unket, dreary, lonely

Untoertly, unthriving

Upkegged, upset

Vessel-maid, dairy maid

Virgin Mary's cowslip, lungwort

Virgin's garland, chaplets of white paper flowers and a pair of white gloves, these were carried at young maiden's funerals in Shropshire in the eighteenth century.

Waddiock, a large piece

Waeny wanty, irregular in shape

Wall-eyed, an eye which is different in colour from the other

Wall-wort, dwarf elder

Wapple-eyed, weak eyes

Wee-wow, lop-sided

Wimberry, the fruit of the whortleberry, found in great quantities on many of the Shropshire hills

Windy, foolish, silly

Witches' stirrups, matted locks in horse's manes, supposed to have been made by witches riding the horses at nights

LIST OF OLD SHROPSHIRE WORDS

Witan-tree, the mountain ash ; there are fine groves in Sherlot
With, a tough pliant twig

Wood tapper, lesser spotted woodpecker

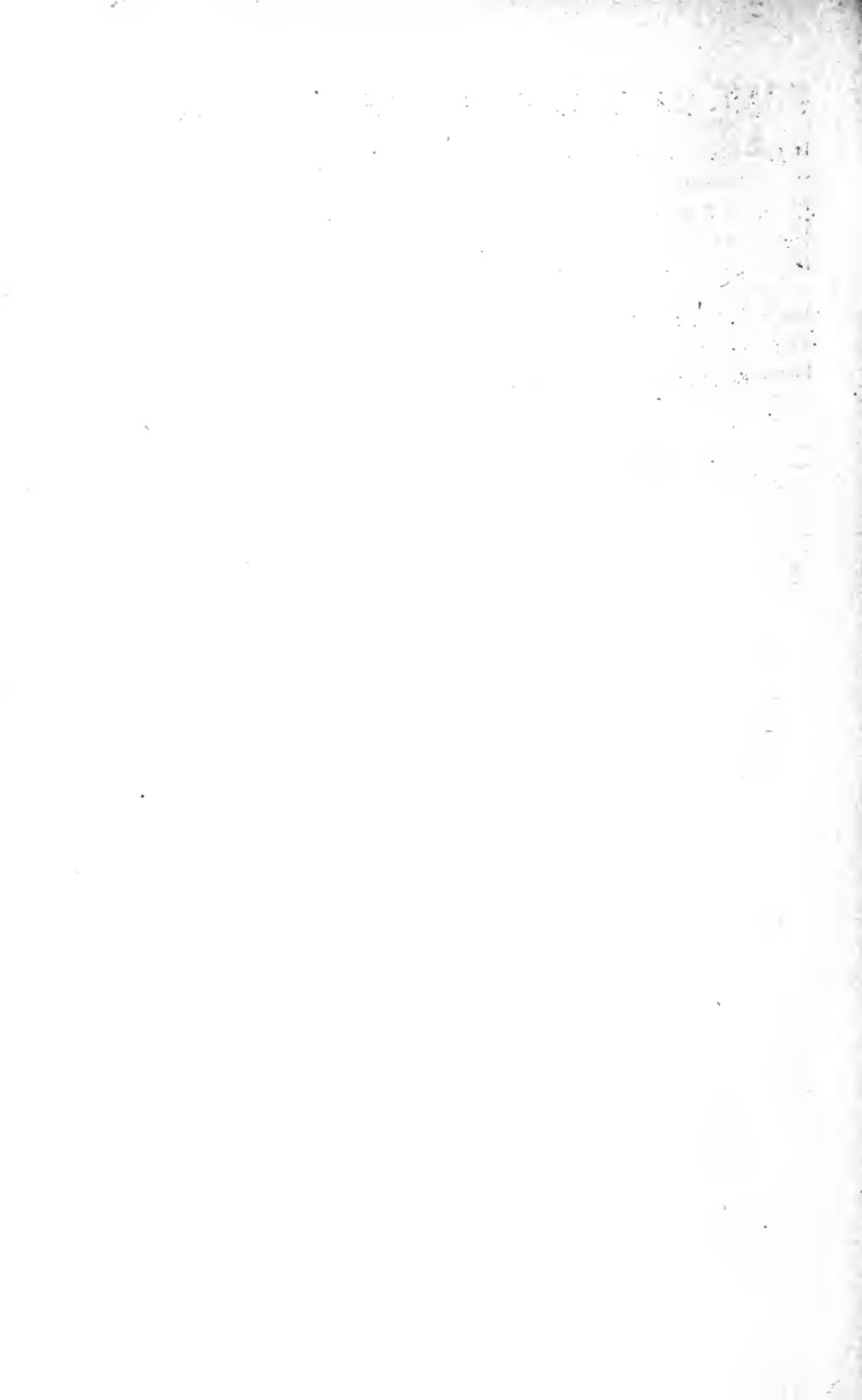
Worch, to cause pain, to irritate

Work-brattle, industrious

Yarbolist, herbalist

Yare, ready

Yellow-homber, yellow-hammer



The Country Handbooks

*An Illustrated Series of Practical Handbooks dealing with
Country Life. Suitable for the Pocket or Knapsack*

EDITED BY HARRY ROBERTS

Fcap. 8vo (6½ by 4 in.).

Price 3s. net, bound in Limp Cloth. \$1.00 net.

Price 4s. net, bound in Limp Leather. \$1.20 net.

Vol. I.—The Tramp's Handbook. By HARRY ROBERTS

With over fifty Illustrations by WALTER PASCOE.

A volume written in defence of vagabondage, containing much valuable advice to the amateur gipsy, traveller, or cyclist, as to camping-out, cooking, etc.

Vol. II.—The Motor Book. By R. T. MECREDY.

With numerous Illustrations.

An invaluable handbook that should find a place in the library of every motorist, or even in the car itself.

Vol. III.—The Tree Book. By MARY ROWLES JARVIS.

Containing varied and useful information relating to forests, together with a special chapter on Practical Forestry.

Vol. IV.—The Still Room. By Mrs. CHARLES ROUNDELL.

A book of information upon all subjects pertaining to preserving, pickling, bottling, distilling, &c., with many useful hints upon the dairy.

Vol. V.—The Bird Book. By A. J. R. ROBERTS.

A guide to the study of bird life, with hints as to recognising various species by their flight or their note.

Vol. VI.—The Woman Out of Doors. By MÉNIE MURIEL DOWIE.

A book of practical value and interest to every sportswoman, lady gardener, and out-of-door woman of every kind.

Vol. VII.—The Stable Handbook.

Vol. VIII.—The Fisherman's Handbook.

By EDGAR SHRUBSOLE.

JOHN LANE, LONDON AND NEW YORK

Handbooks of Practical Gardening

Under the General Editorship of
HARRY ROBERTS

Price 2s. 6d. net, each. Crown 8vo. Illustrated. Price \$1.00.

Vol. I.—The Book of Asparagus. With Sections on Celery, Salsify, Scorzonera, and Seakale; and a chapter on their cooking and preparation for the table. By CHARLES ILOTT, F.R.H.S., Lecturer on Horticulture to the Cornwall County Council.

The Speaker.—"The work of a specialist. Mr. Ilott gives us—for a matter of half a crown—the ripe experience of a life-time."

Vol. II.—The Book of the Greenhouse. By J. C. TALLACK, F.R.H.S., Head Gardener at Shipley Hall.

The Outlook.—"A serviceable handbook for the practical gardener, written with exceptional knowledge of horticultural work. A special chapter deals with the little town greenhouse."

Vol. III.—The Book of the Grape. Together with a chapter on the History and Decorative Value of the Vines. By H. W. WARD, F.R.H.S., for twenty-five years Head Gardener at Longford Castle.

The St. James's Gazette.—"A mine of useful information."

Vol. IV.—The Book of Old-Fashioned Flowers. By HARRY ROBERTS, Author of "The Chronicle of a Cornish Garden."

The Bookman.—"All who wish for a real old-fashioned garden should certainly study this most excellent and practical book."

Vol. V.—The Book of Bulbs. By S. ARNOTT, F.R.H.S., of Carsethorpe, near Dumfries. Together with an introductory chapter on the Botany of Bulbs by the Editor.

The Scotsman.—"Skilled and instructive. It notably enriches the series in which it appears."

Vol. VI.—The Book of the Apple. By H. H. THOMAS, Assistant Editor of *The Garden*, late of the Royal Gardens, Windsor. Together with chapters by the Editor on the History and Cooking of the Apple and the Preparation of Cider.

The Spectator.—"This is a most useful volume, which every grower, whether for his own use or for the market, should consult."

Vol. VII.—The Book of Vegetables. By GEORGE WYTHES, V.M.H., Head Gardener to the Duke of Northumberland. Together with chapters on the History and Cookery by the Editor.

The Morning Post.—"Thoroughly practical. The book can be highly recommended."

Vol. VIII.—The Book of Orchids. By W. H. WHITE, F.R.H.S., Orchid Grower to Sir Trevor Lawrence, President of the Royal Horticultural Society.

The Scotsman.—"There are few writers so well qualified to write with authority upon these flowers."

Vol. IX.—The Book of the Strawberry. With chapters on the Raspberry, Blackberry, Loganberry, Japanese Wineberry, and Allied Fruits. By EDWIN BECKETT, F.R.H.S., Head Gardener at Aldenham Park.

The Morning Post.—"Mr. Beckett deals with his subject in a thorough practical manner, . . . and fully maintains the general excellence shown in the previous volumes of this series."

Vol. X.—The Book of Climbing Plants. By S. ARNOTT, F.R.H.S., Author of "The Book of Bulbs."

The Scotsman.—"This is a concise, practical, and well-informed exposition of skilled knowledge as to the training of creepers, &c."

Vol. XI.—The Book of Pears and Plums. By the Rev.

E. BARTRUM, D.D.

The Scotsman.—"The writer knew as much about the growing of Pears and Plums as Dean Hole knows about the cultivation of Roses."

Vol. XII.—The Books of Herbs. By LADY ROSALIND NORTHCOTE.

Vol. XIII.—The Book of the Wild Garden. By S. W. FITZHERBERT.

The Scotsman says—"Mr. Fitzherbert indicates very clearly how the most satisfactory results may be brought about, and how the most charming effects may be produced. The volume has a number of very beautiful illustrations."

Vol. XIV.—The Book of the Honey-Bee. By CHARLES HARRISON.

This book will be of great assistance to the beginner as showing the practical side of bee-keeping. The handbook contains numerous illustrations which will be of interest to experienced bee-keepers as well as to the novice.

Vol. XV.—The Book of Shrubs. By GEORGE GORDON, V.M.H., Editor of *The Gardener's Magazine*.

A special feature of this book lies in the distinction which it makes between shrubs and trees peculiarly suited to garden cultivation, and those appropriate to the park and woodland. The author desires to encourage the culture of shrubs in gardens, and indicates those most suitable for various purposes and situations.

Vol. XVI.—The Book of the Daffodil. By the Rev. S. EUGENE BOURNE.

The author supplies valuable information on the cultivation of daffodils gained by the results of his own personal experience. "It is to be hoped," he says in his introduction, "that the information may help the lover of Daffodils, not only to grow good flowers, but also to maintain his collection at a high standard, and generally to hold his own with other Daffodil people."

Vol. XVII.—The Book of the Lily. By W. GOLDRING.

A description of, and a practical guide to, the cultivation of all the lilies usually found in British gardens.

Vol. XVIII.—The Book of Topiary. By CHARLES H. CURTIS and W. GIBSON, Head Gardener at Levens Hall.

A textbook of the topiary art, together with some account and famous examples of the application of that art.

Vol. XIX.—The Book of Town and Window Gardening. By Mrs. F. A. BARDSWELL.

A handbook for those lovers of flowers who are compelled to live in a town. The book should be helpful even to those who are quite ignorant in the art of growing plants, and advice is given as to the most suitable plants to grow under the various adverse conditions which town gardens afford.

Vol. XX.—The Book of Rarer Vegetables. By GEORGE WYTHES, V.M.H., Head Gardener to the Duke of Northumberland, and HARRY ROBERTS.

This work deals with a number of vegetables possessing chioce flavour, that are little grown in modern gardens. Not only does the book explain the best methods of cultivation, but also describes the ways in which the several vegetables should be cooked and dressed for the table.

Vol. XXI.—The Book of the Iris.

A practical guide to the cultivation of the Iris, and also a description of and key to all the garden species and varieties. The book will interest equally the botanical student, the practical gardener, and the lover of beautiful flowers.

Vol. XXII.—The Book of Garden Furniture. By CHARLES THONGER.

A practical handbook to the selection, construction, and arrangement of the various buildings, trellises, pergolas, arches, seats, sundials, fountains, and other structures which necessity or taste may suggest as additions to our garden ornaments.

BOOKS ABOUT GARDENS

Seven Gardens and a Palace. By "E. V. B." Author of "Days and Hours in a Garden." Illustrated by F. L. GRIGGS and ARTHUR GORDON. Price 5s. net. Crown 8vo. Price \$1.50. *Third Edition.*

The Chronicle of a Cornish Garden. By HARRY ROBERTS. With Seven ideal Illustrations by F. L. GRIGGS. Price 5s. net. Crown 8vo. Price \$1.50.

Of Gardens: An Essay. By FRANCIS BACON. With an Introduction by HELEN MILMAN and a Cover-design and Frontispiece by EDMUND N. NEW. Demy 16mo. Price 2s. 6d. net.

A Garden in the Suburbs. By Mrs LESLIE WILLIAMS. With Eight Illustrations. Price 5s. net. Crown 8vo. Price \$1.50.

Stray Leaves from a Border Garden. By Mrs MILNE-HOME. With Eight Illustrations by F. L. GRIGGS. Price 6s. net. Crown 8vo. Price \$2.00.

My Vicarage Garden. By Canon ELLA-COMBE, Author of "In a Gloucestershire Garden," &c. With Illustrations by F. L. GRIGGS. Price 5s. net. Crown 8vo. Price \$1.50.

JOHN LANE: LONDON: VIGO STREET, W.
NEW YORK: 67 FIFTH AVENUE.

Flowers of Parnassus

A Series of Famous Poems Illustrated

Demy 16mo (5½ x 4½), gilt top

Bound in Cloth . . . Price 1s. net Bound in Leather . . . Price 1s. 6d. net

- Vol. I.—GRAY'S ELEGY and ODE ON A DISTANT PROSPECT OF ETON COLLEGE. With Twelve Illustrations by J. T. FRIEDENSON.
- Vol. II.—THE STATUE AND THE BUST. By ROBERT BROWNING. With Nine Illustrations by PHILIP CONNARD.
- Vol. III.—MARPESSA. By STEPHEN PHILLIPS. With Seven Illustrations by PHILIP CONNARD.
- Vol. IV.—THE BLESSED DAMOZEL. By DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI. With Eight Illustrations by PERCY BULCOCK.
- Vol. V.—THE NUT-BROWN MAID. A New Version by F. B. MONEY-COUTTS. With Nine Illustrations by HERBERT COLE.
- Vol. VI.—A DREAM OF FAIR WOMEN. By ALFRED TENNYSON. With Nine Illustrations by PERCY BULCOCK.
- Vol. VII.—A DAY DREAM. By ALFRED TENNYSON. With Eight Illustrations by AMELIA BAUERLE.
- Vol. VIII.—A BALLADE UPON A WEDDING. By Sir JOHN SUCKLING. With Nine Illustrations by HERBERT COLE.
- Vol. IX.—RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM. Rendered into English Verse by EDWARD FITZGERALD. With Nine Illustrations by HERBERT COLE.
- Vol. X.—THE RAPE OF THE LOCK. By ALEXANDER POPE. With Nine Illustrations by AUBREY BEARDSLEY.
- Vol. XI.—CHRISTMAS AT THE MERMAID. By THEODORE WATTS-DUNTON. With Nine Illustrations by HERBERT COLE.
- Vol. XII.—SONGS OF INNOCENCE. By WILLIAM BLAKE. With Nine Illustrations by GERALDINE MORRIS.

NEW VOLUMES.

- Vol. XIII.—THE SENSITIVE PLANT. By PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY. With Eight Illustrations by F. L. B. GRIGGS.
- Vol. XIV.—CHRIST IN HADES. By STEPHEN PHILLIPS. With Eight Illustrations.
- Vol. XV.—WORDSWORTH'S GRAVE. By WILLIAM WATSON. With Eight Illustrations by F. L. B. GRIGGS.
- Vol. XVI.—RELIQUES OF STRATFORD-ON-AVON. A Souvenir of Shakespeare's Home. By A. E. WAY. With Eight Full-page Lithographs by THOMAS R. WAY.

JOHN LANE, PUBLISHER, LONDON & NEW YORK

The Lover's Library

Edited by FREDERIC CHAPMAN

Size, $5\frac{1}{4} \times 3$ inches

Bound in Cloth . Price 1s. 6d. net

Bound in Leather . Price 2s. net

- Vol. I. THE LOVE POEMS OF SHELLEY
- Vol. II. THE LOVE POEMS OF R. BROWNING
- Vol. III. THE SILENCE OF LOVE. By E. HOLMES
- Vol. IV. THE LOVE POEMS OF TENNYSON
- Vol. V. THE LOVE POEMS OF LANDOR
- Vol. VI. THE LOVE POEMS OF E. B. BROWNING
- Vol. VII. THE LOVE POEMS OF BURNS
- Vol. VIII. THE LOVE POEMS OF SUCKLING
- Vol. IX. THE LOVE POEMS OF HERRICK
- Vol. X. THE LOVE POEMS OF W. S. BLUNT
- Vol. XI. THE SONNETS OF SHAKESPEARE

Other Volumes in Preparation

THE title of The Lover's Library is sufficiently descriptive to make explanation of the purpose of the Series almost unnecessary.

It is sought to include in a group of compact little volumes, the best Love Poems of the great British poets ; and from time to time a volume of prose, or a volume of modern verse which may be considered of sufficient importance, will be added to the Library.

The delicate decorations on the pages, end-papers, and covers, make the little books dainty enough for small presents, and it is hoped that those who do not receive them as presents from others will seize the opportunity of making presents to themselves.

JOHN LANE, PUBLISHER, LONDON & NEW YORK

THE LIFE OF ST. MARY MAGDALEN

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN
OF AN UNKNOWN FOURTEENTH
CENTURY WRITER BY VALENTINA
HAWTREY. AND AN INTRODUCTORY
NOTE BY VERNON LEE. With 14 Full-
page Illustrations reproduced from works by
the Old Masters and a Cover-Design by
JESSIE KING.

Crown 8vo. ($7\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$ inches). Price 5/- net.

THIS work, now for the first time rendered into English, gives a vivid picture of the life of the Italian bourgeois in the Middle Ages ; the whole drama of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion being filled in with realistic detail of mediæval daily life. The illustrations are reproductions of world-famous pictures in which St. Mary Magdalen appears. They include works by Titian, Correggio, Perugino, Bellini, Guido Reni, Dolci, Credi, Carracci, Crivelli, etc.

THE CARDINAL'S SNUFF-BOX: A NOVEL

BY HENRY HARLAND, Author of

“*GREY ROSES*”

“*MADEMOISELLE MISS*”

“*THE LADY PARAMOUNT*”

“*COMEDIES AND ERRORS*”

A NEW EDITION WITH TITLE-PAGE,
COVER-DESIGN, ENDPAPERS, and 80 Illustra-
tions by G. C. WILMSHURST.

Crown 8vo. ($7\frac{3}{4} \times 5$ inches). Price 6/-

FOR upwards of six months Mr. Wilmshurst was engaged in preparing the designs for the new Illustrated Edition of Mr. Henry Harland's great Novel. The work has been accomplished under the eye of the author, who has passed each illustration before it was sent to the reproducer. Altogether the volume makes a notable and handsome gift-book. The present edition completes one hundred thousand copies of “The Cardinal's Snuff-Box” printed since publication.

FOOTPRINTS OF FORMER MEN IN FAR CORNWALL

BY

ROBERT STEPHEN HAWKER

(VICAR OF MORWENSTOW)

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
C. E. BYLES, AND CONTAINING NUMEROUS
ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. LEY PETHYBRIDGE

Crown 8vo. 5/- net

Publisher's Note

THE growing popularity of Cornwall as one of the playgrounds of England increases year by year the number of those who have visited Morwenstow, and are familiar with the name of its former poet-parson, Robert Stephen Hawker. To such readers in particular this book will make appeal, as well as to lovers of literature in general who may have hitherto heard of Hawker only as a balladist. His prose sketches of Cornish scenery and Cornish worthies deserve to be as widely known as his ballads. They possess a quality which his poetry hardly ever reveals, the quality of rich and abundant humour. The great charm of the book is its peculiarly local flavour. Nowhere is the unique and

THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

AND OTHER STORIES

By RICHARD GARNETT

New and Enlarged Edition. With Frontispiece
Crown 8vo., cloth, 6/-

The DAILY CHRONICLE.—“A subtle compound of philosophy and irony. . . . Let the reader take these stories as pure fun—lively incident and droll character—and he will be agreeably surprised to find how stimulating they are.”

The TIMES.—“Here is learning in plenty, drawn from all ages and most languages, but of dryness or dulness not a sentence. The book bubbles with laughter. . . . His sense of humour has a wide range.”

The DAILY TELEGRAPH.—“Learning and imagination go hand-in-hand, and in the background stands a pleasant humour. The author has a prolific fancy, and does not labour his points; he never bores us with any superfluity of detail, though even in the shortest of his tales he is able to suggest the necessary atmosphere; and he passes quickly from one quaint idea to another.”

The ACADEMY.—“How we envy those readers who now come appreciatively to ‘The Twilight of the Gods’ for the first time.”

The SCOTSMAN.—“Miracles and ancient mysteries give the tone to one and all of these clever tales. . . . The new edition will be widely welcomed by admirers of this most original and versatile writer.”

The MANCHESTER GUARDIAN.—“Those who have already read these tales will be glad of an opportunity of doing so again, and those who do not know them will hardly fail to enjoy the witty writing and humorous episodes in these lighter diversions of a distinguished scholar.”

JOHN LANE, PUBLISHER, LONDON & NEW YORK.



14 DAY USE
RETURN TO DESK FROM WHICH BORROWED
LOAN DEPT.

This book is due on the last date stamped below, or
on the date to which renewed.

Renewed books are subject to immediate recall.

LIBRARY USE

ICLF (N)

~~R JAN 13 BUL~~

~~JAN 13 1962~~

JUN 6 1968 5 9

RECEIVED

MAY 27 '68 - 6 PM

LOAN DEPT.

YB 32716

M173592

961

G 248

of

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

